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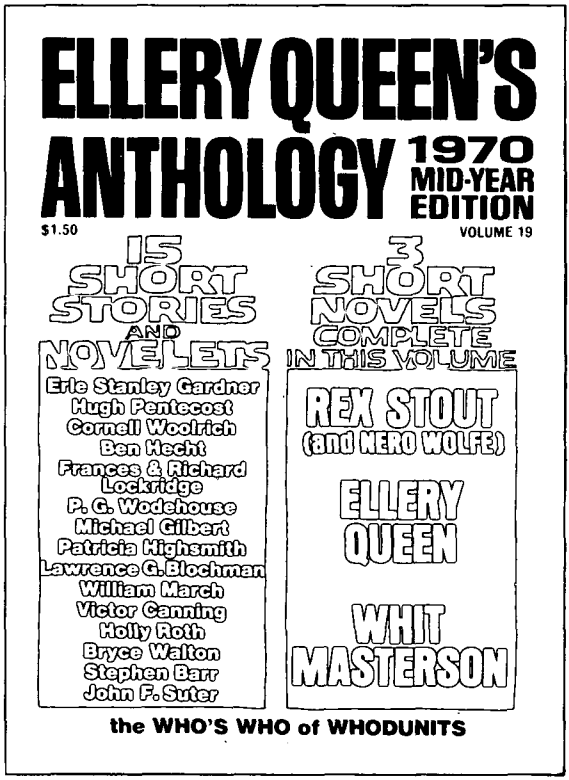

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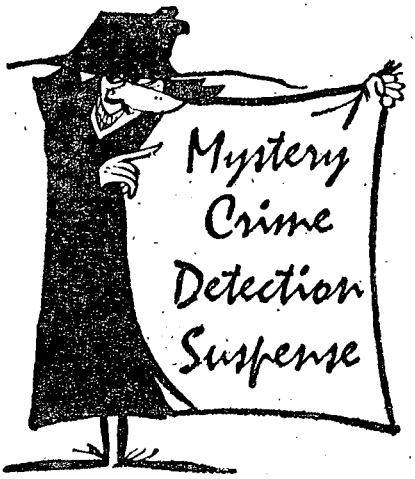

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VAN DER VALK AND THE WOLFPACK

by NICOLAS FREELING

"A WOLFPACK," SAID CHIEF Inspector Van der Valk, only half frivolous.

"Collect your mind," answered Commissaire Boersma. "Assemble what you know about wolves and take a few steps. Complaints are arriving in this office at a rate I can no longer disregard."

Van der Valk picked up an ominously thick dossier and put it under his arm.

What did he know about wolves? That, secretly, he liked them. He was on their side; but come, come, he said to himself, I am a shepherd; this won't do. Jean de la Fontaine, he suspected, was also on their side: even when he related their most alarming habits, didn't he hint at a mocking, barely hidden friendship? Or was it that La Fontaine simply understood wolves?

The wolf, you will recall, accused a humble, timid lamb of horrid misdeeds in a loud bullying voice, fell upon the silly beast and righteously massacred it; but one could not stop a feeling that

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was all the tiresome lamb's ult.

The wolf despised the dog, who ıd agreed to wear a chain and ollar and had found these a small ice to pay for all those rich aterial comforts. And as for the mark made to the stork, who ıd kindly extracted a bone stuck the wolf's throat, it was superb. Nasty ungrateful animal—keep ut of my sight." A prig, that ork.

The wolf looks like a dog. But ıe wolf howls, and the dog can nly bark.

This would not do! The dossier ıentioned three breakings-and-nterings, four robberies with iolence, six snatched handbags, nd one really bad aggression in ıe street, an armed attack against Post Office employee carrying ıoney. And these were only the robables! Wolfpack to be hunted own and exterminated, with no urther ado.

"You've a free hand," said Boersma, "but only in exchange or a quick result."

Because usually time and pa-ience are needed. Thieves must lispose of their loot, and stuff vith serial numbers must be trac-d back to the truck or warehouse vhere it had been stolen. This gang seemed to be pretty smart, because a lot of paperwork had, so far, produced no result at all. The Juvenile Department was getting its arm twisted in a series of ever more peremptory messages from the burgomaster's office—pinch them out, and forthwith.

Van der Valk sighed and went to see a friend on the mobile brigade known to the public as the Anti-Gang Squad. After some diplomatic palaver that would have done credit to a North Korean negotiator he succeeded in borrowing two cars, four specialized men, and a lot of expensive radio equipment. Required in return were four men of his own and himself as the staked-out goat.

"If anybody gets clonked, it's going to be you," said his colleague pleasantly.

The next stage was to go to the laboratory and ask for a booby trap. A leather satchel, like those carried by officials paying out money, was filled with ingenious gadgets. Van der Valk agreed mournfully to something that spouted bright green dye, after complaining that noises alarmed the public, that tear gas would blind nobody but himself, and that several sophisticated mechanical devices were much too fancy.

The Post Office was not cooperative either. He would have thought they'd be grateful for his suggestion that they didn't want any more men clonked. But they didn't like his wearing their nice uniform. Finally, however, they

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told him the schedules on which money was carried. Far too rigid, he said disapprovingly.

There was also the risk of the gang switching its attacks to gas-meter men. Or selecting a different district. The wolfpack was not consistent in its choice of territory.

"Has to be a poor quarter. The bourgeois pay by check, or they don't pay at all. You only find cash in a slum district."

To his men it was an amusing game, provided it didn't go on too long. To the anti-gang specialists, who sometimes spent weeks constructing a trap involving a bank, a jeweler, and seven cars, it was a cheap job, a bore. To his superiors it was an opportunity for complaining that a lot of public funds appeared to be getting spent.

To him—well, nobody was interested in that. He couldn't even tell his wife, and it was likely that he would get hit with something unpleasant. His uniform was much padded, his cap specially reinforced, but an uncomfortable amount of shrinking flesh was still exposed.

When everything was ready they all spent two days during which nothing happened at all, but Van der Valk learned just how ungrateful, unreliable, ungenerous, and really bloody-minded the public is where money is concerned. The squawk about public funds rose to a scream and Commissaire Boersma told him he was making an idiot of himself. Van der Valk, his ears ringing and his feet hurting, was obstinate. He was improving with practise. If he got the sack he would be able to claim previous experience when he applied for a job either to the Post Office or the Gas Board.

It happened, at last, and very quickly. A powerful shove from behind was timed nicely with a young girl—did she have long black hair?—blowing an ounce of ground pepper in his face. The straps of his satchel were deftly cut with a razor but they had been reinforced with steel mesh; he got a shoe in the mouth, for that.

He had gone down in the gutter, in the classic protection attitude, elbows and knees tucked in to protect vital organs; he clasped hands on the back of his neck and rolled over to preserve his back and kidneys. He got a horrible crack across the shins, and broke off his shouting into the throat microphone tucked under his jacket with a loud obscenity. Not what the Post Office expects of its employees. The pain in his eyes was all that could be expected of tear gas, and more.

He was totally blind. He could hear mutters, yells, grunts, pants of breath; he did not know how much of this noise he himself was making. There was a sudden

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scream of brakes from cars he hoped were his, but if they weren't there was nothing he could do about it; he was on the deck, and staying there.

There was a long delay then, during which nobody made any effort to help him, and he had time to become cross about this before he was dragged at last to his feet, bundled into a car, and driven to the hospital where a snickering intern cleaned his face for him.

"What the hell is there to laugh about?" Van der Valk said fretfully.

"Wait till you see yourself."

He was the genuine, original, literal sight for sore eyes! His uniform—the Post Office would be furious—was covered with emerald-green dye. So was his hair. A nurse, unable to stop giggling, was swabbing away in a vile stink of ether.

"It's very difficult to get out," she said with relish. Mirth was general.

And what good came of it at last, asked little Peterkin.

Aha, he was told, the whole lot were in the bag.

"I hope they're as green as I am," he muttered vengefully.

Some slight satisfaction rewarded him in his office. He was still green about the gills, but the five young wolves, three male and two female, were a lot greener. They had only been dipped in cold water. But they weren't at all abashed.

"Aggravated and armed assault," Van der Valk announced.

"A flatfoot dressed up as a pension pusher," said a boy with contempt.

"Pepper isn't armed assault," said a girl sweetly. She did have long black hair, but he would not have been able to pick her out of a lineup.

"Anti-gang flics," remarked another with evident satisfaction at having been given star treatment.

"Not this one," corrected the girl. "Stinking little Youth-and-Morals flic, this one. Redeye Robert!"

He had expected total silence and this talkativeness seemed encouraging.

"I find fourteen charges on this dossier, all supported by eyewitnesses."

"Some eyewitness you make!"

He had fallen with both feet into that one.

"Let's see—a crippled woman of sixty-eight had her arm twisted by a young girl with long black hair. All her fault for not saying straight off that she had already banked the day's take. Yes, Miss, you were about to speak?"

The long-haired girl deliberately stuck out her tongue at him.

Van der Valk tapped his teeth with his pen. Young wolves . . .

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None of them would say a thing except to exchange free comments on his appearance, his wages, his probable morals, and his presumed parentage.

He stayed polite, because he had to, mostly. At intervals he made notes on his scratchpad.

Intelligent, articulate—unimpressed and quite fearless—no sign of tension. One nail biter, habitual—well dressed. No pronounced personal vanity—neither compulsive hair combers nor mirror gazers. Antisocial feelings organized into powerful barrier—indifferent to family reactions to publicity, to logical reasoning, suggestion of cooperation, humor, or sarcasm.

Know their law too—cynically confident in the clumsinesss of the tribunal. The Juvenile Court is one of the best jokes they know!

Conclusion after initial examination—tough.

They were locked up. None seemed at all perturbed by the police-bureau cell conditions; all seemed well informed about what they would get to eat, how much, when, and their exact rights concerning washing, exercise, and what they were allowed to keep. The two girls had to be confined separately.

"Aren't we going to be assaulted in the back room? We'd love that!"

He saw the Commissaire briefly that evening.

"Real wolves and not just wishful thinking. No chink, and their minds made up. Society being good, bad, or indifferent doesn't interest them, since they are born to prey on it. Getting caught is part of life and they accept it with equanimity."

"So, you'd sugggest, turn them over to the Officer of Justice, since the charges are cut and dried and ready to be smoked. Or do you have fancy ideas—rehabilitation beginning right here among the policemen?"

"When we can," said Van der Valk mildly. "We're better equipped than a court. I'd like to make at least the attempt."

"Wasting time."

"Will you give me twenty-four hours to prove myself wrong?"

"Yes," said the Commissaire unexpectedly.

He chose the long-haired girl. Her father was a television cameraman which, maybe, was why the father seemed as cynical as she did; he wasn't the slightest bit interested in his daughter.

She sat in her cell on a concrete slab that was her bed at night. Van der Valk sat on the bucket because there wasn't anything else to sit on. He threw her a cigarette.

"The wolf," he said vaguely, "was pretty annoyed with the shepherd after he noticed them one day eating roast mutton."

Wonder of wonders—she smiled.

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"I like wolves," he said.

Another smile.

"Jean de la Fontaine emarks—to the shepherds—that ie wolf is only in the wrong 'hen he is not the strongest. omething for me to think about. Iaving thought, I'd like to ask ou a question."

"Go ahead."

"A female wolf, which is the ighest-powered wolf, gives a aby wolf affection and care. If ou had a baby wolf—and I ssume you wouldn't mind as long s you were sure it was a real 'olf—just what would you teach t?"

She looked at him bleakly. He vas being pretty whimsical for a man sitting on a bucket and he thought she was going to tell him off. Instead she said, "What's the time?"

"Four o'clock—five after."

She lay back on the concrete slab, put her hands behind her head, and closed her eyes.

"Come back at six."

"Okay," he was surprised to hear himself say.

Six o'clock was ordinarily the time to go home to one's wife, children, supper, and bourgeois pursuits. For a wolf, however, it might be worthwhile to stay on for a little. Or it might be of no use at all. But one couldn't pass up the opportunity to communicate, to rehabilitate.

CRIMINALIMERICK

DUTCH UNCLE I

by D. R. Bensen

When it's crime that you're trying to balk
And the law has been slowed to a walk,
You may turn with aplomb
(If you're in Amsterdam)
To Chief Inspector H. Van der Valk.

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ANTHONY BOUCHER'S CHOICEST

In her Editor's Note to *Boucher's Choicest*, Jeanne F. Bernkopf explains her selection of 24 stories from the six annual volumes edited by Mr. Boucher before his death in 1968. As she herself expressed it, Mrs. Bernkopf "tried to pick from each edition of *Best Detective Stories of the Year* those stories I as his (publisher's) editor knew to have been his special favorites" — stories "distinguished by his taste, imagination and delight in variety," demonstrating "not only the quality but the scope of the mystery" short story, and showing "the brilliance of a Boucher assortment . . . a sampling of his standard of excellence."

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Cosmopolitan	2
The Saturday Evening Post	2
(from books)	2
MD	1
The New Yorker	1
Playboy	1
The Saint Magazine	1

Thus, 45.8% of Anthony Boucher's favorites — from all the new detective-mystery short stories published in American magazines and books from 1962 through 1967 — nearly one-half of the best new stories appeared first in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and these "choicest of the choice" did not include any of the superior reprints, both short stories and short novels, which are offered by EQMM each month.

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The New York Times Book Review,
October 30, 1966

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The fifth in J. J. Marric's (John Creasey's) new series about Gideon, the Commander of the C.I.D. (the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard) . . . the perfect "companion piece" to the new Nicolas Freeling story in this issue—about street attacks by, in this instance, a London wolfpack; and Gideon, like Van der Valk, cares . . .

GIDEON AND THE YOUNG TOUGHS

by J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

POSSIBLY PLACES OTHER THAN Piccadilly could claim to be the hub of the world, but for Gideon, Piccadilly was the true center of things. It had fascinated him when he had been a child, an adolescent, and—also a long time ago—a rookie policeman. It still fascinated him now that he was Commander Gideon of the C.I.D., the Criminal Investigation Department of the Metropolitan Police Force.

He knew every inch of it.

He knew when any of the vivid electric signs was being changed, or when a new one was going up. He knew when the shops changed hands. He knew what was playing in its theater and its cinema. He knew the newspaper sellers, the flower sellers—when they were about, these days—and he regarded the statue of Eros rather as he might one of his own children.

In most matters a progressive, he felt a positive hostility to all new architectural and town-planning schemes for Piccadilly Circus; but he had the comfortable feeling that in his lifetime he need worry about nothing more serious than the switch to one-way

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traffic along Piccadilly itself. *If* that ever came about.

Behind Piccadilly, in Soho, there lurked much crime and vice, as well as fine food, some happiness, and quite a lot of goodness. Piccadilly Circus itself was so brightly lit, so well populated and so well policed, that it was seldom the scene of a crime. A youth or a girl who did not know his or her way about might run into trouble in the side streets, but never in Piccadilly.

Of course, there were days of trouble. Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race night, for instance, or the Welsh or the Irish Twickenham festivals. On such great occasions police were drafted well in advance, and Eros was boarded up. Anyone who managed to climb to the top of the statue and perch some article on the arrow deserved his picture in the newspaper.

These things were as much a part of London as Piccadilly Circus itself.

The outburst of hooliganism which came one hot summer evening did not trouble Gideon. Drunks did sometimes get out of control. High spirits plus hard liquor could create vicious tempers out of cheerfulness.

The second incident, however, was very different.

It happened three nights later.

Police Constable Sturgeon, of the Central London Division, was on duty—alone. He knew that h next big job would be to hel keep the traffic moving when th theaters emptied. Th plainclothesmen would look afte the pickpockets who selected tha hour to get busy.

Constable Sturgeon had notice a group of youths, quite we dressed, rather noisy, coming ou of one of the side streets. H glanced round to see if any othe constables were near, but sa none. He strolled in the directio of the group, hoping that the sigh of his uniform would quiet them Instead, it seemed to do the op posite—to excite them.

There were six of them. A he approached, they made a cor don across the pavement at th spot where the Circus led int Coventry Street. People behin them and people in front wer suddenly hampered. In th bewildering way of all big citie a crowd gathered in a fe seconds. No one protested at first everyone assumed that there ha been some kind of accident.

Sturgeon knew that the youth were doing this deliberately.

"Break it up, chaps," he sai in a pleasant voice; he had bee warned that a hectoring note wa a bad one to start with.

None of the six spoke. Sturgeo only had a split second's warnin of what was going to happen Then they attacked. One mad a flying tackle and brought th

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constable down, and the others swooped.

A woman screamed, and a man shouted, "Stop that!" in a quivering voice. Someone called waveringly, *"Police!"*

Sturgeon felt as if a pack of wild dogs had savaged him. As if in the distance he heard the shrill of a police whistle, and then he lost consciousness. But all the assailants were gone by the time the police had rushed in strength to Piccadilly Circus.

"They all got away," reported Superintendent Lemaitre the next morning. "Every single perisher. The division had a dozen chaps there inside of five minutes, but it was too late. A couple of passers-by got black eyes trying to stop the swine. And this is the *second* time, George."

Gideon blocked much of the sunlight coming through the window that overlooked the Embankment. In silhouette he looked huge. His shoulders were hunched and he had one hand deep in his pocket.

"How's Sturgeon?" he demanded.

"Twenty-seven stitches."

"Can he talk?"

"Not until tomorrow."

"Have Central check all their chaps, and you check all ours. See if you can get any description of the attackers. Find out if any of them can be identified with those responsible for the outbreak of trouble last week."

"Right, George," said Lemaitre.

He knew just how incensed Gideon was about such a thing as this happening on "his" beat. He was not surprised when Gideon announced, the next day, that he was going to the Charing Cross Hospital, where they had taken P.C. Sturgeon.

Coming out of the ward was a tall, slim, nice-looking girl. Her eyes were bright, as if shining with tears.

"Are you a friend of Constable Sturgeon?" inquired Gideon.

"I—I'm his fiancée."

"Oh. I see. I'm Commander Gideon. If you see his parents tell them how sorry I am, won't you? And you can be positive we'll find out who did this and make sure it doesn't happen again."

"It *mustn't* happen again," the girl said, and her voice broke. "It will be weeks before he's able to get about."

"Mind telling me one thing?" asked Gideon.

"If—if I can."

"Was he nervous about going to Piccadilly? Did he have any reason to dislike that particular part of his beat?"

"Good heavens, no. I think he loves it."

Sturgeon himself, barely able to talk, did not say that he "loved it," but he confirmed that he liked

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that part of his beat. He did not remember having seen any of his assailants before, and had no idea at all about the possible motive.

"As a matter of fact, sir," he said huskily, "I got the idea that they were doing it for sheer enjoyment."

Gideon arranged for a closer watch to be kept on the Circus and gave instructions for a radio call to be made to the Yard if there seemed to be any gathering of young toughs. There were three or four false alarms in the week. Twice Gideon took Kate, his wife, for a drive as far as Whitehall, and then calmly walked her to Piccadilly.

He chose nightfall. The bright lights, the gay colors, the throngs of people of all nationalities, the chatter of voices, the laughter, the furtiveness, the timidity, the gaping visitors—all these things were part of this place.

On Monday of the next week another police constable saw a group of dark-haired youths who looked as if they might be out for trouble. He signaled a radio car. The car called for help from the Yard. Two policemen approached the group—one from the front, one from behind. Quite suddenly the youths acted exactly as they had with Sturgeon—made a thin cordon across the pavement.

The constable, hand on his truncheon, spoke as if casually.

"Break it up there. Don't let's have any trouble."

"Trouble!" one of the young men spat at him—and they all leaped.

Two plainclothesmen and three more uniformed officers were onto them before the constable was brought down. After a short sharp fight two of the six managed to dash across the road in front of moving traffic and escape. Four were hauled round the corner. A Black Maria was soon on the spot, and they were charged with disturbing the peace.

The next morning Gideon sat in court while the charges were being heard. A divisional Chief Inspector asked for a remand in custody.

"I really don't see that such a remand is necessary," said a lawyer appearing for the young toughs. "These are hard-working lads from good families. They all belong to a social club in Victoria, and have never been in trouble before. They had a little too much to drink and lost their heads, that's all. Each has pleaded guilty, your worship, and I'm sure each will apologize. May I submit that it might well be sufficient to bind them over?"

The four youths looked fresh, bright-eyed, even wholesome.

"What—ah—what have you to say to that, Chief Inspector?" inquired the magistrate, a fair man.

"We would like time to obtain

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more information about the accused, sir."

"I see. Very well. I shall remand each of the accused for eight days, each on his own recognizances of £25. Can you each find £25?" he asked the accused, as if craftily.

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"Silly old fool," said Lemaitre to Gideon. "They'll jump their bail—what does he think twenty-five quid means to a chap of eighteen these days?"

"We want to find out all we can about them," Gideon said. "And more about the club, too. Oh—and find out if Sturgeon recognizes any of them."

Sturgeon did not.

The youths appeared after their remand, and each was bound over to keep the peace.

"If you ask me they're young savages out to make trouble—they don't need a motive," Lemaitre said. "And it might happen again—any time the young louts are looking for kicks. It's a sign of the times, George. That's what it is."

"It's a sign of nerves when a club like theirs needs a mouthpiece," Gideon said. "Have we discovered anything about the place?"

"Seventy or eighty members—mixed sexes—ages seventeen to twenty-one," reported Lemaitre. "All the usual club activities."

"Have a closer eye kept on it," Gideon ordered.

It was exactly four days later that Lemaitre stormed into Gideon's office, clapped his bony hands together, and twanged, "Now we're in business, George! A lot of those club members go to Sammy Dench occasionally. Sammy is the smartest fence in London. Now if we could only find out why he uses those kids—put your thinking cap on, George!"

"It's on so tight that it's stuck," said Gideon. "Lem, tell Central to act as if it were an anti-vice week. Have uniformed chaps concentrated in Piccadilly Circus, and plainclothesmen in Soho. We've been looking for a motive, and now we have it."

"What motive?" shrilled Lemaitre.

"They've caused those disturbances as a distraction," Gideon said. "They've intended to make us concentrate on Piccadilly—as we have. There'll be another distraction before long, and maybe others. One night, while we're busy coping—"

"Other members of the club will be staging raids in the side streets!" cried Lemaitre.

It happened again three nights later.

This time a knot of seven youths suddenly started fighting and cursing outside the Criterion.

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Almost at once police whistles shrilled and the police appeared as if from nowhere.

Behind the Circus, in those narrow Soho streets, other youths seemed to erupt from dark doorways. They raided restaurants and theaters, stole the day's receipts, and rushed out—into the arms of waiting police.

"But what made you twig it?" Lemaitre demanded.

"It took me too long really," said Gideon. "I was sure no one would cause trouble in the Circus unless they intended to risk being caught. They were too slick in getting away to be just drunks or young savages. I simply went on from there."

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Peter Ambrose was an ambitious, aggressive man—the kind that makes enemies. So it was not at all unusual that he began to receive threatening letters. Warnings? Perhaps—but then the anonymous enemy put teeth in the threats . . .

YOUR DAYS ARE FEW

by RICHARD O. LEWIS

PETER AMBROSE HANDED THE letter across the desk to Chief of Police Weber. Weber glanced at it and looked up, frowning. "Another one?"

Ambrose nodded. "I got it in the mail this afternoon and brought it right over. I didn't even bother to open it." He was a dark-haired man, clean-shaven, manicured, dressed in a tailored suit—an aggressive type of businessman that was grudgingly respected by men and openly admired by some women.

Weber stroked his long chin thoughtfully as his eyes went back to the letter. He was a tall lean man who looked as if he had spent much time worrying about the problems of other people. The address—Ambrose Peter J 2010 W Euclid—had obviously been clipped from a telephone directory before being pasted into place. He slit the envelope carefully and shook out the single bit of white paper. "Your days are few," he read aloud. "Your end is near at hand." The words had been cut from a newspaper and, like the address, been pasted into place.

"Could be the work of some kid," Weber said. "Or someone playing a practical joke."

"Maybe," said Ambrose, his square face set into hard lines. "And maybe not!"

Weber let the paper fall from his fingers. "There is really not much we can do about it, one way or another," he said. "The stamped envelope is the standard type that can be bought in any post office. The scrap of paper could have been torn from any memo pad or piece of typing paper. The letter could have been dropped into any mailbox anywhere in town."

"But there must be something to go on!" Ambrose insisted. "A clue of some kind!"

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"If we get any clue at all," said Weber, "it will have to come from you."

"Me?"

"Right. If someone is threatening your life, then that person must have a reason—real or imaginary—for wanting you out of the way. You must have had some unfortunate associations with him quite recently. If so, then you must know the identity of that person."

"Look!" said Ambrose, his face flushing. "You know as well as I do there are a lot of people who would like to see me out of the way—ever since I began the Lostcreek Park development! There are always those who stand in the way of progress."

Weber nodded. He was well aware of the furor the Lostcreek venture had created among some of the citizenry. Lostcreek Park was a narrow strip of land that, until recently, had been owned by the city. It wasn't much of a place, really—a strip of wilderness with a few weedy footpaths among the trees and shrubs, a tiny stream that went nowhere, and a miniature waterfall. Surrounded by sedate, mansionlike homes of an earlier era, the little plot had lain there for years, all but forgotten.

Ambrose had seen his chance, gained legal title to the strip, and was now in the process of clearing it and building boxlike houses for people of low or middle-income. Too late, the homeowners surrounding the property saw what was happening. Their quiet, meandering avenues would soon be turned into noisy thoroughfares carrying factory workers to and from their jobs at all hours of the day and night, and the entire area would become vulnerable to hordes of screaming children. They rose up in protest, but there was little they could do. No zoning laws or building restrictions had ever been established there, for, up until now, none had been needed.

"I have a legal right to develop that site," Ambrose said defiantly. "And I have a right to sell to whoever wishes to buy."

"I doubt if anyone in that part of town is actually trying to get rid of you," said Weber. "More likely, someone is just trying to frighten you off."

It was late that afternoon when Ambrose finally drove out to the development area and stopped his car in front of the field office he had built there. To the south of him several houses had already been completed and a few more were under construction. North of him a rock ledge had been blasted away.

He entered the office, sat down at the desk, and stared into space. He had stuck his neck out. That was for certain. With his wife's

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inheritance, his own savings, and all the credit he could get, he had made the big plunge. Unexpected lawsuits had taken their toll, and now he was strapped. Unless he could get hold of some cash soon, he would have to halt construction until he was able to sell the finished houses at a profit to recoup his capital. That would mean that he would have to go plodding along, selling one house before building another, and not really getting anywhere. At least, not getting anywhere as fast as he wanted to.

Plodding was not a part of Peter Ambrose's nature. The advent of two new factories in town would soon create a wave of prosperity. Peter Ambrose intended to ride the crest of that wave, make a killing, then roll rapidly higher to even greater things. And he was determined to let nothing stand in his way.

The telephone on his desk jangled. Even before he picked up the instrument he knew who the caller would be—his wife, Alice.

"Yes?" he said.

"It's nearly six o'clock," said Alice. "Time for me to leave. I thought I'd call and remind you that dinner is in the oven. You sometimes forget—"

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"But you should eat something!" she insisted. "Maybe I should stay home—that is, if you want me to—"

"No, no," he said. "You go ahead. I've got work to do when I get home, will be busy for hours."

"I cleaned your desk for you," said Alice. "I polished it real nice and put everything back exactly the way it was—"

"Fine, fine," said Ambrose. "Now, you run along." And he hung up.

For the first two years of their married life they had lived in the neighboring town of Plainsville, and Alice had joined a bridge club composed of four other women of her own age. Each Friday night they had enjoyed a 6:30 dinner, followed by two hours of cards and gossip. When the larger city of Newton had lured Peter into moving there in search of greater opportunities, Alice would have gladly given up the bridge club, but Peter had urged her to continue. "You need a night out once in a while," he had told her. Now, more than once, he had been glad that he had insisted she make the weekly drive to Plainsville on Friday nights . . .

Before leaving the development area that night, Ambrose made a quick trip to a small building of corrugated iron a short distance away from his field office. He let himself into the building with a duplicate key he'd had made a couple of months ago. Minutes later he was back in the field office again, an open brief case

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lying on his desk. He took the two sticks of dynamite from his pocket, taped them with care to the three sticks he already had in case, and tucked the lethal package into the bottom drawer of the desk. He had taken the dynamite sticks one or two at a time during the past few weeks, careful not to arouse the suspicions of Bartel, the construction boss.

When Ambrose brought his black sedan to a halt in his home driveway, he noted with satisfaction that Alice had already left in the little two-door. He carried his attaché case containing legal documents, plans, and architectural drawings into the house and placed it on his desk. The desk was so highly polished that he could almost see himself in its glossy surface. He shook his head slowly. She was always cleaning and polishing the house and everything in it! When she wasn't doing that, she was fawning over him, waiting on him hand and foot, tryint to anticipate his every need. At first he had welcomed and enjoyed her attentions. But they had soon become annoying. And now he felt only a deep aversion to them.

He sank into his chair, picked up the telephone, and dialed a familiar number. Gloria Stone answered almost immediately, her contralto voice a heady, vibrant melody.

"And how is my little redhead?" Ambrose greeted her.

"Fine," said Gloria. "And how is my big ambitious tycoon coming along?"

"Right now," said Ambrose, "I'm busy as hell with architectural drawings. Some of these designers can't seem to get it through their heads I want inexpensive houses, not mansions!'

"And you also want money and—and other things," said Gloria.

"And I intend to get them," Ambrose promised. "Very soon."

"I'll be waiting."

"I'll see you in a day or two," said Ambrose. "Right?"

"Right," said Gloria, and hung up.

It was Wednesday afternoon when Ambrose again stood before the desk of Chief of Police Weber.

Weber looked up questioningly. "Another letter?"

"Come," said Ambrose, through tight lips. "I want to show you something."

A half block down the street from the station Ambrose stopped beside the two-door he had driven that day. The window in the driver's side was down. Ambrose pointed through to the opposite window. There was a round hole there, surrounded by an area of splintered glass.

A frown creased Weber's forehead. "And just how did that happen?" he asked.

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"It happened just a few minutes ago while I was driving out to the development. There is an uncleared fringe of trees and brush along the right side of the road. Someone was waiting for me there. Obviously, someone who knows that I generally drive along the road about two o'clock every afternoon."

"Did you stop to investigate or anything?"

"Look!" snapped Ambrose. "When a slug misses my head by a fraction of an inch I don't stop to investigate! I get out of there, but fast!"

"Don't know exactly what we can do," said Weber. "But I'll send a couple of the boys out to have a look—"

"Well, it's about time you did something," Ambrose said pointedly. "Two threatening letters and now—now this! It's beginning to get to me! Can't keep my mind on my work, keep forgetting things."

Ambrose drove the car to a garage, had the rest of the broken window removed, and ordered a replacement.

"We'll have it here by tomorrow," the mechanic promised, "and can install it in no time at all."

Ambrose shook his head. "I'll be tied up all day tomorrow. How about late Friday afternoon? I can bring the car around then."

"Fine. We'll be ready for you."

A half hour later Ambrose parked the car in the shaded drive of a little cottage at the edge of town. He went to the door and pushed the pearl button.

The door opened almost immediately, and Gloria Stone stepped to one side and made a sweeping gesture for him to enter. Her low-cut white blouse and mauve stretch pants immediately stirred Ambrose.

In a moment they were on the sofa, locked in each other's arms.

"And how is my financial wizard doing now?" Gloria asked, finally pushing him away. "Things shaping up?"

"Just fine," said Ambrose knowing full well what she meant. "I think I'll be able to start the divorce proceedings sometime next week."

Sure. Let her believe he was planning to get a divorce. That way it would be better for everybody concerned.

He had met the red-headed Gloria nearly a year ago when she had come to Newton in search of a house. Her husband had died a few months earlier, and she had wanted to make a clean break from everything in the past—including the snoopy relatives in the town where she had lived. Before she had finally bought a house from his listings, he had spent the greater part of three weeks showing her about, during which time they had be-

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come acquainted—intimately. And after she had taken up residency in her new home, the intimacy had continued—mostly on Friday nights while Alice was playing bridge.

The vivacious Gloria had paid cash for the house, and it hadn't taken Ambrose long to learn that she had received a large enough inheritance from her late husband to live gracefully for a long time to come. Because of their friendship he had hoped to get enough money from her to finish the Lostcreek Park venture and reap a quick harvest. But she had demurred.

"When I place money on a horse," she had said, her green eyes flashing, "I'll be doing the riding. Where Gloria's money goes, Gloria goes."

The implication had been plain enough.

And so Ambrose had been faced with an important decision. With the fawning, housecleaning, cloying Alice—and his growing accumulation of debts—it would take him years of struggle before he could get even close to where he wanted to be. But with the beautiful Gloria—and her ready cash—he could become a rich man almost overnight, a power to be reckoned with in the city of Newton. Together he and Gloria could go places!

It had not taken him long to reach the practical solution: get rid of Alice. He had considered divorcing her, but had dismissed the idea almost immediately. First, he had no real grounds for divorce. Second, she might suddenly become stubborn—since he had used her inheritance to initiate the Lostcreek Park venture—and demand the return of her money as part of the divorce settlement. Or, equally bad, a smart lawyer might get her a substantial interest in his holdings along with heavy alimony. Either way it would spell ruin as far as his future was concerned.

Divorce being out, there was only the obvious alternative, and he had devised a foolproof plan to bring about that alternative, a plan that he hadn't even dared to tell Gloria. It was much better if she believed he was about to begin divorce proceedings. If she knew he was capable of getting rid of an unwanted mate, she might very well hesitate about placing herself in similar peril by marrying him.

Now, on the sofa, he took her hand in his and looked gravely at it. "There is something I should tell you, Gloria," he said. "I don't want to alarm you, but my life has been threatened several times during the last week or so. I have received two anonymous letters, and this afternoon on my way to the park someone shot a hole through my car window, the slug barely missing me."

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Gloria drew back, her eyes round with concern. "But—but why?" she wanted to know. "Why would anyone want to *kill* you?"

Ambrose shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe because of the Lostcreek deal. Or it could be, of course, that someone is just trying to frighten me."

"Well, let's hope it's that!" said Gloria. "Now that I've come this close to getting you, I don't want to lose you!"

"Chief Weber and his boys are working on the thing. They may come up with something soon. But I must admit that the threats have unnerved me to the point where I scarcely know that I'm doing half the time, I'm so absent-minded."

On Friday morning Ambrose drove the black sedan to his downtown office and spent several hours with two young architects. At two o'clock that afternoon he drove out to the Lostcreek development, as usual, and entered the field office where he spent an hour with Bartel, going over construction progress and a few plan changes.

"If anyone comes around to look at houses or lots this afternoon," he told Bartel when they had finished, "you show them around. I've got to take the two-door to a garage and get a window replaced. Probably won't be back the rest of the afternoon."

Bartel nodded, picked up his sheaf of papers, and left.

Ambrose waited a while, then took the brief case from the bottom drawer and placed it carefully on the desk. He opened it and checked his wrist watch. Four o'clock. He set the timer so that it would detonate the charge in exactly two hours and fifteen minutes. 6:15. Alice would be midway between Newton and Plainsville. And he, Ambrose, would be just arriving home.

He carried the brief case to the sedan and placed it unobtrusively on the floor directly against the back of the driver's seat, then got in and drove away.

He had gone over his plan step by step many times during the past few weeks and could find no flaw. Certainly Chief Weber would never suspect that he, the hard-hitting Ambrose, would send himself those childish letters and shoot a hole through the window of the two-door. Neither would Weber have reason to suspect that he, Ambrose, had been exposed to a short course in demolitions in the Army a few years back. It would seem quite natural to everyone—including Gloria—that whoever had been threatening his life had placed the bomb in his brief case during his lunch hour or during the afternoon—or had switched brief cases during the time his car had been unlocked and unguarded—and had set the

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device to go off at the time he usually was driving home from work.

Ambrose felt certain that before this day was over his troubles would be ended. He had taken out life insurance on both Alice and himself shortly after their marriage, and the $25,000 he would collect after her accidental demise would be enough to tide him through the few months he would wait before marrying Gloria. After that—clear sailing.

As he brought the sedan into the driveway beside the house, Alice came out the back door, surprised that he had arrived home at this unaccustomed hour.

"Anything wrong?" she called to him from the porch.

"No. I just came home to pick up the two-door to have the window replaced. I don't know how long it will take, but if I'm not home by the time you're ready to go to Plainsville, take the sedan."

"I don't *have* to go," she said. "If you'd rather I didn't—"

"You go ahead. And don't fix dinner for me. I'm swamped with work." He got into the two-door and drove off.

It was nearly six o'clock when Ambrose, the window in the car replaced, began his leisurely drive homeward, a tight little smile tugging at the corners of his lips. It was only natural that he should take the damaged car to the garage that afternoon and leave the sedan for his wife's use. It was only natural that, considering his state of confusion concerning the threats on his life, that he should forget to transfer the brief case from the sedan to the two-door or take it into the house. He had very carefully let both Weber and Gloria know how forgetful and nervous he had been lately.

Again he could see no flaw in his plan.

As he pulled into the driveway he noted with satisfaction that the sedan was gone. He consulted his watch. 6:12. In just a few minutes now he would be getting a frantic phone call—probably from Weber himself—informing him of the terrible tragedy.

The telephone was already ringing when he entered the house. He hurried to his desk and picked it up, his hand trembling. Maybe the mechanism had gained a few minutes. Maybe the blast had already gone off! Not that a minute or two, one way or the other, would make any difference.

"Ambrose speaking," he said, trying to hold his voice level.

"I tried to reach you before I left but I didn't know which garage you had gone to—"

"Alice! Where—where are you?"

"I'm in a telephone booth. I wanted to let you know, dear—"

Damn! The thing was set to

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go off any second now! And there she was—away from the car and safe in a telephone booth! Ambrose felt beads of perspiration pop out of his forehead. He had visions of all his plans going sky-high in one big bang!

"—that I cleaned out the sedan this afternoon and found your brief case. And knowing how absent-minded you have been lately and how swamped with work and how you would be needing it, I put the brief case right there beside your desk so you could—"

Ambrose didn't hear the last part of the sentence.

He did hear the first part of the explo

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Averill, the CIA chief for southern Germany, pooh-poohed the risk; the assignment was only a milk run—all the retiring agent had to do, on his way home to the United States, was pick up a small package in Munich, catch a plane, and deliver the package 24 hours later in New York. Simple. No risk. A milk run. But, ah, "there is many a slip 'twixt the lip and the cup."

Another of Robert Edward Eckels' low-keyed, thoroughly convincing spy stories. . .

MILK RUN

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

I GLANCED INTO THE REARVIEW mirror again. The headlights were still there. They'd been there for the last half hour, maybe longer. And it was past time for me to find out why. Gradually I eased up on the gas pedal. The lights in the mirror grew larger, then diminished as the car dropped back to its original distance behind me.

No question about it now—somebody was following me. And was either being very stupid or didn't care if I knew. Probably the latter, because with only the long stretch of autobahn ahead of me there was very little I could do about it.

I cursed silently. That's supposed to help, but of course it didn't. Mainly, I supposed, because I had no one to blame but myself. I'd let Averill talk me into this assignment against my better judgment.

"No," I had said when he'd broached it, "I've been working this area too long. Too many people know my face." Averill was the CIA controller for southern Germany and had been my boss for five years. Five years is a long time to maintain a cover.

"But," Averill had protested, "this is no more than a milk run. You pick up a small package in Munich, catch a plane, and deliver the package twenty-four hours later in New York. Simplicity itself." Averill didn't mention what the package was and I didn't ask. In this business, lack of curiosity is a positive virtue.

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"And," he had added slyly, "you're planning to go back to the States anyway. Here's your chance to let Uncle Sam pick up the tab"...

So now I found myself rolling down the night-darkened autobahn with a confident tail wagging behind me. Too confident. I'd remembered something that my tail might not have taken into account.

I speeded up. It caught my tail by surprise and his lights dropped back momentarily. Then he was back to his accustomed distance, even decreasing it slightly once or twice to let me know he could do it whenever he wanted to.

That didn't bother me at all. I'd never thought I had a chance of outracing him in the bug that Averill had provided for me. In fact, it was even questionable whether its motor could stand the pace I was now setting much longer. But if I'd decided right it wouldn't have to.

Luck was with me because there just ahead was what I'd remembered—a convoy of 7th U.S. Army jeeps and trucks filling the right-hand lane as far as the eye could see. I swung out into the left lane and began to pass them.

Apparently they'd been on the march for some time and road discipline had begun to slip. The rear trucks in particular were dropping farther and farther back, but throughout the length of the convoy the gaps between the trucks were far too wide. I waited until I was about halfway up the line, then cut sharply in between two trucks.

The effect was immediate. The truck behind me pulled up on my tail and began blinking its lights to tell me to get the hell out. I paid no attention and soon the driver gave up. But the one break in the convoy had alarmed the other drivers and they promptly closed up.

That left my tail out in the cold—and in something of a bind. He could either drop to the end of the column or hang on in the left lane and keep an eye on me. He chose the latter. And that was a mistake—although as with most mistakes he didn't realize it until it was too late.

I stayed with the convoy until we rolled into Munich. Then I swung smoothly off to the right at the first promising side street, leaving my tail blocked by the continuing line of trucks.

I wondered if he swore silently to himself. And if it helped him any.

The plan called for me to leave the car at the airport where Averill would arrange for someone to pick it up. But the car was too dangerous for me to keep now. I parked it where it wouldn't attract any attention for several days, walked to where I could catch a cab to the Bahnhof, then

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walked an additional three blocks to a not quite respectable commercial hotel where they wouldn't wonder that my only luggage was a small black attaché case. And settled down for a good night's sleep, confident that no one would track me down.

Of course, someone did.

He stood beside my breakfast table, beaming down at me.

"Ah," he said, "it is you. Last night when I see you check in I think, perhaps. But then—" he cocked his head to one side and frowned to dramatize his bafflement—"the name on the registration card is not the one I remember from Zurich. But now," he went on, his expansive smile back in place, "I see it is the same man behind the name."

"Hello, Dietrich," I said. "Or has your name changed since Zurich too?"

He sat down quickly and leaned forward on the table, spreading his hands. He was a round man with a round body and a round face on which a perpetual film of perspiration glistened. "No," he said, "I am still Dietrich. It is my name and everyone knows who and what Dietrich is."

And that was the best reason I could think of for his changing his name. I'd known him for some time but had only dealt with him once. Several years before I'd bought some information from him and then had got out of Switzerland a bare jump ahead of the police he'd sold me out to. To give Dietrich his due, there was nothing personal about it; it was just a matter of business to him. All the same I trusted him about as much as I would an electric eel.

"How'd you happen to find me, Dietrich?" I said.

"By chance," he said, slapping the table. "By chance. I had business here in the hotel last night. And there you were, checking in at the desk."

"And that's all there was to it?" I said. "Nothing more than chance?"

"Of course not. What else could there be?"

"Someone tried to follow me into town last night. It could have been you."

"No," Dietrich protested, "not me." The denial was automatic, but I believed it. Because for just a second his eyes had been unguarded, and I could almost see his busy mind at work speculating on how this information could prove useful to him.

I picked up half a roll and began to butter it. "Well," I said, "whoever it was, he was wasting his time. I'm quitting the business. Going home."

"Good," Dietrich said, slapping the table again. "Good for you. I too have quit the business. I have my own now—here in

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Muenchen." For proof he fished a grubby business card out of his wallet and offered it to me.

I shrugged, popped a piece of roll into my mouth and took the card. It identified Dietrich as a Private Inquiry Agent and gave an address and phone number.

"Perhaps," Dietrich said, "you can throw a little something my way sometime." He smiled. "In this world friends should help one another."

"Sure," I said. I slipped the card into my breast pocket. I figured I would find it there the next time I sent the suit to the cleaners and throw it away.

Dietrich glanced ostentatiously at his watch. "I must go," he said. He stood up and shook my hand formally in the German manner. *"Vieles Glueck,"* he said.

I wished him the same good luck and watched his broad back depart. Then I went back to my breakfast.

Of course, when I left the hotel he tried to follow me. I wandered apparently aimlessly through the business district and lost him.

There is something about camera shops that fascinates spies. Perhaps it's a case of life imitating art since all spy movies seem to have mysterious camera shops in them. Be that as it may, my contact was in a camera store on a side street not far from the Frauenkirche.

It was a small place sandwiched in between two larger buildings and identifiable only by the clutter of Agfa and Kodak displays in the windows flanking the door.

A bell set above the door tinkled as I entered. There was no one about, so I stepped up to the counter and waited. When I decided I had waited long enough, I coughed twice, waited again, then called out into the silence, "Anybody here?"

No answer. No scurrying of feet as the shopkeeper rushed in to greet a customer. No movement of the curtain screening off the doorway behind the counter.

I didn't like it. The shopkeeper had been alerted to my coming. He would have made the contact—unless something prevented it. And the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach said that the something that prevented it wouldn't be pleasant.

I moved around the counter intending to pull aside the curtain—and never completed the movement.

There, crumpled on the floor, was the old man who had been my contact. Someone using a small-caliber gun had shot him neatly through the forehead.

Reflexively, my eyes flicked around the room. There was no sign of its having been ransacked. Which said it had been a professional job. The package—and I had to assume the killing was

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tied in with the package somehow—could be disguised as anything—microdots are versatile. And no professional would waste time looking for something he wouldn't recognize even when it lay right in front of him.

And it had lain right in front of him—or almost. A cardboard box stuffed with envelopes containing processed film sat on a shelf on the wall behind the counter. The package was an envelope made out in the name of Erich Hofstadter.

"You've been seeing too many bad movies," I had told Averill when he had explained what I was to ask for. Now, considering the body at my feet, I wished I'd seen a few of those movies myself.

After a quick glance at the door and windows I stepped over the old man's body and riffled through the envelopes. The one I sought was where it should have been—under the H's. I pulled it out and gazed at it thoughtfully.

Question: Was this really the package I'd come for or had the old man talked before he died, leaving me to find only a red herring left by his killer?

Answer: there was no way I could tell. I would just have to proceed on the assumption the package was the right one.

I tossed the envelope in my attaché case, closed the case, and was just snapping the metal catches when the tinkling bell over the door brought my head around in what I knew could only be interpreted as a guilty start.

A small, slightly dowdy woman was standing in the doorway and staring at me with wide timorous eyes. She looked half ready to turn and run screaming from the shop. And that was the last thing I wanted to happen.

I cleared my throat. "*Bitte*?" I said. Please—the standard greeting of a German shopkeeper to a customer. Five years of practise had smoothed most of the rough edges off my German accent, so I might just get away with it—provided she wasn't the old man's wife or daughter. Or an agent. Or someone who wanted a long technical discussion on cameras and photography.

"Isn't Herr Gregorius here?" the woman said. The question was a cross between an accusation and a bleat.

I fought the impulse to look down at the body. "No," I said. "He had to go out. Perhaps I can help you though."

"Perhaps," she said. Her voice was still tentative, uncertain, but the suspicion had gone from it. "Herr Gregorius thought my pictures might be ready today."

"Pictures?" I said blankly. I followed her gaze to the cardboard box of envelopes and caught on. "Ah, yes," I said. "What is the name, please?"

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"Kallmann."

I riffled through the envelopes swiftly, then shook my head. "Sorry. Perhaps tomorrow."

The woman smiled sadly, like someone used to being disappointed, and left without another word. I gave her three minutes to get clear before beating it out of there myself.

Point One in favor of my having the right package: I was followed when I left the shop—and not by Dietrich. This one was a tall man in a gray suit. I let him tail me for several blocks, then shook him by the simple expedient of hopping on a street car just as the car began to pick up speed. Thirty feet behind me, the man in the gray suit didn't have a chance of catching up and didn't even try.

I had been shaking tails with such ease these last few days that it never occurred to me that this time it had been too easy.

I checked in at the airline ticket counter a half hour before flight time. They like you to be there even earlier for international flights. But for reasons of my own I didn't want to be loitering around the airport for any appreciable length of time. And if the customs people had to rush me through—well, that wouldn't displease me either. As it turned out, though, I had plenty of time.

The clerk behind the counter stamped my ticket and slipped it into an airline envelope. He glanced casually at my attaché case. "Just the one bag?"

I nodded. "I'll carry it on," I said.

"Very well," the clerk said and handed back my ticket, "There will be a slight delay in boarding," he went on. "Time and gate will be announced later." He moved away before I had a chance to ask the reason.

"A slight mechanical difficulty," a voice to my left said pleasantly. I turned toward it. A tall heavy-set man with a cherubic face under a Prussian haircut was smiling at me. His cheekbones were so high that his eyes seemed almost Oriental. He looked to be about 50, but could have been younger or older.

He went on, "The radio was damaged and needs to be replaced, I understand. Of course, the airline cannot tell you that. Any hint that their machines are less than perfect might worry you. So they act mysterious and leave you prey to all sorts of imagined fears." He drew himself erect, inclined his head smartly forward, and said formally, "Otto Heinsdorf at your service." He smiled again. "Forgive me for speaking so abruptly, but I noticed your concerned look."

I muttered something that was meant to pass as thanks.

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"Ah," Heinsdorf said, "an American. It must be pleasant to be returning to your own country." He moved close to me. "Perhaps," he continued, "you will let me buy you a coffee and talk about America and your happy return there?"

I tried to step back; the German habit of speaking into your face from inches away is one I've never got used to. "Thank you," I said, "but I don't think so."

"Oh," Heinsdorf said admonishingly, "I think so. I think so very much. If, that is, you hope to see your homeland again." He smiled and gestured with his hand for me to precede him to the coffee shop.

I did.

Heinsdorf sat happily at the small table, holding the silvered coffee pot in one hand and a cream pitcher in the other, and poured simultaneous streams of coffee and cream into his cup. "Tell me, my American friend," he said, "do you know what it is that you're carrying?"

"What I'm carrying?" I said in my best bewildered-tourist voice.

Heinsdorf smiled patiently. "Denials," he said, "are for amateurs. But—" he sighed—"if you insist." His voice became brisk again. "We know the old man at the camera shop had it. You were seen to visit his shop. And when you left you made no attempt to recontact your superior. Therefore, you found what you were looking for. Secondly, you made no effort to pass it on to anyone else. Therefore, you still have it."

"Therefore," I said, "you want it."

Heinsdorf's smile broadened. "Let us say that my employers do. But that doesn't answer my first question: do you know what the package is?"

When I said nothing, he went on blandly, "Ah, as I suspected, you don't. Well, put delicately, what you have is a list of unreliable people in positions which—shall we say—require a great deal of reliability. Such a list would be valuable to the intelligence service of any country. And quite frankly, my friend, there are enough people interested in taking it away from you to insure that you'll never reach your destination with it. If you think you'll be safe once you get on the plane, think again. It would be simple enough to skyjack it to Cuba."

"Very interesting," I said drily. "But why tell me all this? Why not just let me find out about it when I got off at Havana airport?"

Heinsdorf shook his head vigorously. "You misunderstand me. I didn't say that *I* had arranged to have your plane sky-

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jacked. No, my employers would regard a landing in Cuba as much of a tragedy as you would."

"Just who are your 'employers'?"

Heinsdorf shrugged. "Why don't we just say that they are the people who are prepared to pay you ten thousand dollars for the package."

Point Two in favor of my having the right package: Nobody would offer that kind of money for the wrong envelope.

Heinsdorf resumed: "If you're concerned about what *your* employers would think, they need never know. All you would have to do is report that you found nothing at the camera shop. And who is there to contradict you? Certainly not the old man. He was very dead when I left him."

"You killed him?" I asked, almost casually.

Heinsdorf spread his hands in a classic gesture of helplessness. "What was I to do?" he said. "He was a witness." He saw my face and added quickly, "But surely he meant nothing to you?"

"No," I said, "I'd never met him. I was just thinking that I'd be a witness too."

Heinsdorf shook his head slowly. "No," he said, "you will be either an accomplice—or dead." He stood up, pulled an old-fashioned watch from his vest pocket and studied its dial. "You have," he said, "until your plane leaves to decide which. I shouldn't imagine that would be very long now." He snapped the watch lid shut and slipped it back in his pocket. "By the way," he said as an afterthought, "I trust you aren't foolish enough to think you can leave this airport. You wouldn't get ten steps beyond the entrance."

"I could yell copper," I said, "and leave with a police escort."

Heinsdorf let out a great guffaw. "And turn your package over to the West Germans for nothing? I know your allies, but surely there are limits to even the closest friendship between countries. Especially since there may be American names on that list." He shook his head again. "No, my friend, I don't think you will do that." He put his hand on my shoulder. "When you want me—and you will want me—I will be on the Observation Deck." He was still laughing as he walked out the door.

I was beginning to resent the way first Dietrich and now Heinsdorf had promoted me to the status of friend on the least provocation.

Dietrich.

I sat at the table for a few moments, biting lightly on my knuckle. Then I went to a phone booth.

I waited for Dietrich in the coffee shop, ignoring the pre-

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liminary announcement of my flight. Things shouldn't get really critical until the final call was sounded, but just the same I was beginning to sweat when Dietrich finally arrived.

Following instructions, he ignored me and sat down at a table slightly to my rear. I let him get settled, then drained the last of my coffee and stood up. He followed me out and across the lobby to the Observation Deck, keeping a good twenty feet behind me.

Heinsdorf was standing at the railing, watching a huge jet, its wingtips trembling, lumber by on its way to the takeoff point. He glanced at me briefly as I came up, then turned back to the jet.

"These machines fascinate me," he said. "So massive and yet so fragile."

"If you say so," I said. "Look," I went on, "I've been thinking over your offer. And the money's not enough. I want fifty thousand—U.S. dollars."

Heinsdorf frowned. "I have no authority to go beyond ten thousand," he said slowly.

"Then do what you have to and get that authority," I said harshly. "Otherwise I destroy the package. And I don't think your employers would like that."

Heinsdorf pursed his lips and thought that one over. "I'll have to make a phone call," he said. "Will you wait for me here?"

I shook my head. "It's a little too open out here to suit me. I'll wait back in the coffee shop."

He nodded and left the platform. I waited a minute, then left, still trailed by Dietrich. Instead of going straight back to the coffee shop, though, I cut over to the public washroom. Dietrich followed me in a couple of seconds later.

"All right," I said as soon as I was sure we were alone, "that man I was just talking to—who is he and who does he work for?" Dietrich would know if anybody did. A freelance operator's survival depended on his keeping an accurate Who's Who of Spies in his head.

He shrugged. "Like you," he said, "he uses many names. One I heard recently was Heinsdorf. It may have changed, though."

"It hasn't," I said. "Now, who does he work for? The highest bidder?"

"No." Dietrich's voice reflected his distaste. "He's a fanatic. A Maoist." Fanatic was the worst epithet Dietrich could use. It meant someone who acted out of ideology rather than selfish interest. And who was, therefore, even for this business in which everyone was a liar and a cheat, particularly untrustworthy.

"Such nice people I'm meeting these days," I said. "See anybody else you know around the airport?"

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"No one I know," Dietrich said. "But there were two KGB types resting in your flight lounge." He shook his head. "Some day they will learn, perhaps, not to go to the same Stalinist tailor."

That at least bore out Heinsdorf's allegation that he wasn't the only one after the package. It was beginning to look too as if he'd also been right when he said I didn't stand a chance.

I took five 100-DM notes from my wallet and handed them to Dietrich. "Go back to your office," I said. "If I want you again, I'll call you there."

Dietrich folded the bills lengthwise and wrapped them carefully around the first two fingers of his left hand. "It puzzles me, though," he said slowly, "what all these people are doing here, in this airport, at this time.'"

"Keep that up," I said, "and you may find out what happens to curious people. You wouldn't like it. Now," I went on, "we'd better not be seen leaving together. You first." I turned and bent over the washstand to scrub my hands.

Five minutes later a machinery salesman from Dusseldorf pushed open the door and was the first to discover me sprawled on the floor, the attaché case open and empty beside me. There was a strong odor of chloroform still hanging in the air.

Being a good German, he ran yelling for Authority. And within seconds an airport policeman was there, bringing behind him the inevitable crowd of the morbidly curious.

By now I was sitting up and the policeman knelt beside me. "What happened here?" he said.

I grabbed the attaché case and stared into it. "My God!" I cried. I swallowed hard and shook my head as if to clear it. "This is too important a matter," I said. "I want to see someone from the Verfassungsschutz immediately."

The policeman stared at me blankly. Then he did what every policeman does when faced with an unfamiliar situation—he fell back on routine. He took out his notebook and poised his pencil over it. "Your name, please?" he said.

Over his shoulder I could see Heinsdorf at the rear of the small crowd turn and whisper something to the man next to him. Then they both were gone.

"There's no time," I said to the policeman.

"Your name?" he insisted.

In the end I was taken to a police station where I was allowed to tell my story to a series of officials of ascending rank until finally I was brought before one who made only a token pretense

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of not being connected with the Security Police.

"So," he said, "you admit to being an espionage courier operating on the soil of the Federal Republic."

"Yes," I said. "It would be senseless to deny it, because I need your help in keeping that list out of the wrong hands. You've got to stop Dietrich and Heinsdorf from getting away."

He picked up a pencil and tapped the eraser end idly on the desk he was sitting behind. "No one is going to get away—or go anywhere for that matter," he said, "except you." His voice was cold and professionally unsympathetic. "You're worse than a spy. You're a spy who has failed. You've compromised yourself, your country, and the Federal Republic in such a manner that the affair cannot be hushed up. However, to avoid further embarrassment to an allied power, we will give you the option of leaving the country immediately without contacting anyone."

He stopped tapping and looked up at me. "The alternative is prosecution in the Federal courts for an infringement of German sovereignty."

I chose the plane.

As I was being hustled out of the police station I caught a glimpse of Dietrich being brought in. His face was pale and frightened. I almost felt sorry for him. The police are never gentle with his kind. Still, better the police than Heinsdorf.

My regular contact was waiting for me at Kennedy International. His name was Kiefer and he was a tall gangling man with a prominent Adam's apple and a nervous habit of blinking his eyes every two or three seconds.

"I wasn't sure whether or not you'd be here to meet me," I said.

Kiefer blushed. He'd obviously been told to give me the boot and he didn't relish the job. "Oh," he said, "there was no question of not meeting you. But, well, under the circumstances, this will have to be our last contact. Your usefulness to the Agency is, well, seriously compromised and—"

"Fine with me," I said." I was planning to retire and write my memoirs anyway. So if we can go some place where we can make the transfer safely, I'll give you the package and be on my merry way."

Kiefer stopped short in midstride. His mouth dropped open and for once he forgot to blink. "The package?" he finally managed to gasp out. "But that was stolen."

I took his arm and started him moving again. "There's an old saying, Kiefer," I said, "that you should bear in mind as long as

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you stay in this business: Believe nothing you hear and only half of what you see. There was no robbery. I faked the whole thing by emptying a bottle of chloroform down a drain and then lying down on the floor. It was the only way I could think of to get out of Germany in one piece."

It had been a lousy trick to play on Dietrich, though. Nobody with half a brain could have missed him following me like a puppy dog from the coffee shop to the Observation Deck to the washroom. And then coming out first and alone. It was a short and logical step from there to the conclusion that he'd grabbed the package and run. But then, I'd owed him one for Zurich.

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Professor Amos Ponsonby of Briarwood College is now a series detective. In this, his newest case—a literary dying message—Professor Ponsonby draws on his academic background and ivied (and ivory-towered) knowledge to rescue his godson, Public Defender Paul Anders, from "ignominious defeat." But Professor Ponsonby does not solve the case alone—he would be the first to admit it: he enlists the aid of a distinguished panel of well-known and famous American literary figures—including Bronson Alcott (the father of Louisa May Alcott), Edward Emerson (the son of Ralph Waldo Emerson), William Ellery Channing, and, last but most decidedly not least, Henry David Thoreau . . .

PONSONBY AND THE DYING WORDS

by ALAN K. YOUNG

THE COUNTY ATTORNEY CAST a final glance at his notes and then dropped them casually on the prosecution table.

In the back row of the crowded courtroom Professor Ponsonby shifted nervously. Here it comes, he thought—the testimony that was almost certain to send Samuel Greatheart to prison for murder. The two preceding witnesses had doubtlesss told much the same tale as Sergeant Means would now tell, but they had been amateurs. Here was the expert, the trained observer; here was the man who would take Samuel Greatheart's scalp for society.

From his seat on the aisle, Ponsonby could see the young defendant's profile—the b r o a d Shoshone forehead, the s t e r n Shoshone nose, the jet-black hair and the black eyes that never once during the trial had l o o k e d anywhere but into the eyes of his accusers, or those of the twelve men and women who soon would judge him. Beside him Public Defender Paul Anders slouched in his chair, defeat written in every sagging line.

Poor Paul, thought Ponsonby—saddled with an a l l - b u t - defenseless case in his first appearance as Public Defender. For how could he hope to persuade the jury to close its ears to the

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murdered man's last words?

The County Attorney approached the balding, red-faced man on the witness stand. "Will you tell the court your name and title, please?"

"Detective Sergeant Alfred Means, Briarwood Police."

"And will you tell us, please, Sergeant, where you spent the evening of April fourth last, and what you were doing at the time?"

"Yes, sir. I spent that evening at the bedside of the late Professor Nicholas Twining in Briarwood Hospital. I was there to get a statement from him in case he regained consciousness."

"And did Professor Twining regain consciousness while you were present?"

"Yes, sir, he did. For just a minute or two before he died."

"Now, Sergeant, the court has already heard the testimony of Nurse Mary Gebhorn and Hospital Orderly Horace Cayther as to what they heard Professor Twining say that evening in response to your questions. I now intend to take you over the same ground, but first let me ask you this: during that evening or since, have you discusssed Professor Twining's last words with Miss Gebhorn or Mr. Cayther, or been informed by them or by anyone else for what they thought they heard Twining say?"

"No, sir, I have not."

"So that any common ground between your testimony and theirs must stem entirely from your having shared the experience of being present at Professor Twining's deathbed?"

"Yes, sir."

The County Attorney cast a satisfied glance at the jury. "Now, Sergeant, please tell us exactly what occurred in that hospital room from the time Professor Twining regained consciousness until the moment he died."

"Well, as soon as we realized he was conscious—it was the orderly who first noticed his eyes were open—both the nurse and I started talking at once. That was my fault; I was excited—I'd been in that room off and on for three days without ever seeing the color of his eyes—and I started identifying myself while she was still asking him how he felt. But then we saw that he was trying to say something, so we both shut up and he said something like *one at a time.*"

"'Something like' is rather vague, Sergeant. Could you be more specific?"

"No, sir, I don't think I can. Professor Twining sounded very groggy and was breathing real hard—he had to take a deep breath after almost every word—and sometimes he made a sound that might've been a word or it just might've been a rattle in his throat. But I think he said—very haltingly, you

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understand—*one - at - a - time.*"

Ponsonby's thoughts returned to the testimony of the two previous witnesses. Nurse Gebhorn had been under the impression that there had been at least one other word in that mumbled phrase, but she hadn't been able to swear to it; Horace Cayther had missed the remark altogether, having stepped outside to send for the resident physician.

"What happened next?" the County Attorney asked.

Sergeant Means ran a chubby finger around the inside of his rapidly wilting collar. "Well, sir, at that point I said to the nurse, 'Let me go first, please, Miss,' and then I said to the deceased, 'Professor Twining, I'm Detective Sergeant Means of the Briarwood Police. Can you tell me who it was that hit you?' "

"And did Twining reply to that?"

"Yes, sir, although not very satisfactorily from my point of view. He said—still very groggy, you understand—*I did not,* and then a couple words that I just couldn't make out, and then the word *we,* and then he said what could have been another word or maybe a groan, or maybe he was just gasping for air. But then he said, real clear this time, the word *quarreled.* And then he took a deep breath—at least I think it was a breath—and he said the name *Ann.*"

"In other words, Sergeant, he could very well have been trying to gasp out the statement, 'We quarreled over Ann'?"

"Your Honor, I object!" Paul Anders was instantly on his feet, his chubby face glowing with indignation.

But the judge needed no prompting. "Mr. Franks, you know better than that! Objection sustained. Clerk, strike that last question from the record. And the jury is hereby instructed to disregard any words other than those which the witness testifies to having heard the deceased speak, or to believing he heard the deceased speak."

The County Attorney bowed almost imperceptibly, as though fearful of cracking his paper-thin veneer of contrition.

"Blasted hypocrite!" muttered Ponsonby. The deliberate transgression, he knew, had been a telling point for the prosecution. Nurse Gebhorn had testified that Professor Twining had mumbled *and* and then let his sentence die, and the orderly had been quite certain that the word had been either *ant* or *aunt.* But since Professor Twining's only daughter was named Ann, the sergeant's testimony would undoubtedly strike the jury as representing the most likely interpretation.

And what was worse, all three witnesses had now testified to having heard those deadly words

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—*we* and *quarreled.*

"All right, Sergeant," the County Attorney continued, "let's take it from where the deceased uttered what you, a trained observer, understood to be the name *Ann.* What happened next?"

"Well, sir, then there was a long period of silence—so long that if Professor Twining's eyes hadn't been open and moving I'd have thought he'd passed out again. And I was getting nervous, so I said, hoping to sort of stimulate him, 'Was it Luther Cobb who hit you?'"

"And did he reply to that?"

"Yes, sir, he sure did. All this time he'd been lying there with a kind of dopey look on his face, but when I asked him if it was Luther Cobb that hit him he looked right at us, very deliberate like, and he said real clear: *That's a fallacy. That's not right.*"

"I see. He denied that it was Luther Cobb who'd struck him. What happened next?"

"He shut his eyes again, and I got to thinking what the Chief would say if I found out who didn't hit him instead of who did, so I asked again, 'Professor Twining, who was it that did this to you?' And that's when he said it."

The County Attorney stood quietly for several moments, letting the irresistible magnet of whetted curiosity rivet the jury's attention to his next question. Only when the tension in the room was almost palpable did he ask, "What did he say, Sergeant?"

"Well, sir, Professor Twining opened his eyes again, still looking right at me, and he said, *Actually, it was*—But then his voice sort of trailed off again, and he turned his eyes toward the ceiling, sort of puzzled like, as though he saw something up there that he couldn't quite make out, and then he said a word I didn't quite get, but I think it was *noose*—"

A wave of laughter swept the courtroom, momentarily easing the tension. Ponsonby chuckled with the others as he recalled the testimony of the previous witnesses: young Horace Caylher, who was known to all Briarwood as an ardent hunter, had been certain the dying man had mumbled the word *moose,* while Nurse Gebhorn had distinctly heard it as *juice.*

The judge gaveled for silence. The laughter died, the tension snapped back into place.

"And then?" prompted the County Attorney.

Sergeant Means took a deep breath, as though he were exhausted by the weight of what he was about to speak. "Then Professor Twining looked right at me again, and he said, clear as a bell, *Indian.* Then he just closed his eyes and stopped breathing."

The County Attorney turned slowly to face the jury; he re-

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mained facing them as he framed his final question. "Let me make quite certain that we all understood you correctly, Sergeant. When you asked Professor Twining, 'Who was it that did this to you?', he replied, *Actually, it was*, and then a word you aren't entirely sure of but which could have been *noose*, and then, clear as a bell, the word *Indian*. And having said that, he died. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Your witness, Mr. Anders."

So there it was, thought Ponsonby: that inescapable, seemingly unchallengeable word *Indian*, testified to now by three solid, reliable witnesses. Of course Nurse Gebhorn thought the dying man had said *Indians*, making it plural, and perhaps the defense could do something with that.

But do what? he asked himself sarcastically—suggest to the jury that the entire Shoshone nation had attacked Nicholas Twining? No, if there were any way Paul could save his client, it lay in finding some logical explanation for Nicholas Twining's last, devastatingly incriminating word. Which was exactly what Ponsonby had been trying to do ever since Paul first told him of the deathbed accusation against Samuel Greatheart, and so far Ponsonby hadn't come close to finding such an explanation.

Or had he? As he watched the Public Defender rise to begin his gallant but futile cross-examination, Ponsonby let his thoughts drift back to the morning several months before when Paul had first shown him the transcript of Sergeant Means's preliminary testimony. Hadn't there been a moment that morning when he'd sensed that there was an explanation lurking just over the horizon of his memory if only he could reach out and pull it into the daylight?

It had, he remembered, been a lovely April morning in his sunlit study on Spring Street . . .

Ponsonby had laid down his pen, leaned back in his chair, and peered at his housekeeper over the rim of his spectacles. "Mrs. Garvey?"

Mrs. Garvey had sighed and straightened up from her task of watering the potted ferns in the broad bay window. She had known what was coming—the Professor frequently used her as a sounding board for his latest "scribblings," as she thought of them, even though they often dealt with subjects whose very existence was a profound revelation to her. "Yes, love?" she asked resignedly.

"Tell me how this sounds to you—it's a commemorative passage on Professor Twining which I've been asked to prepare for the Faculty Minutes."

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"Ah!" said Mrs. Garvey, brightening. Here was something more to her liking—a real-life murder that had bestirred their quiet college community as no other event in thirty years, a topic far more satisfying than those bloodless, bodiless scandals—"the unwarranted prostitution of our mother tongue"—that the Professor was always going on about in letters to the Briarwood newspaper.

Adjusting his spectacles more firmly on his nose, Ponsonby returned his attention to the passage.

" 'Nicholas Albert Twining,' " he read aloud, " 'Roylston Professor of English at Briarwood College, died April fourth in his fifty-first year. For twenty-two years Professor Twining was an inspired and inspiring teacher, a productive scholar and a warm and generous friend to an ever-widening circle of students and colleagues. An expert in Nineteenth Century American literature, particularly the Transcendentalists, he so leavened wisdom with wit as to make himself loved as well as respected by all who took his courses. His scholarly legacy includes four books, at least one of which, *Sunlight on Walden Pond,* deservedly earned him national acclaim. At the time of his death he was working on a *Life of Thoreau* to which he had devoted four years of energy, and enthusiasm beyond measure.

" 'Although loathe at any time to part with this blithe and ebullient spirit, we yet may find comfort in the fact that he has left us at a time of year when a reawakening world can remind us, in the words of that Concord rebel whom Nicholas Twining knew so well and admired so much, that *our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity.*' "

Professor Ponsonby lowered the paper and peered expectantly at his housekeeper.

"Oh, that is nice," said Mrs. Garvey enthusiastically. "That's just lovely. And I do so like that part about the blades in eternity. But I wonder now"—she paused, frowning—"shouldn't you say a little something about the black-hearted devil what struck him down?"

"Good heavens, woman!" huffed Ponsonby. "This is a commemorative minute, not a news story of Professor Twining's murder!"

"Maybe so, love, but I don't see why that scoundrel Luther Cobb shouldn't be given his comeuppance in commemorable minutes same as anyplace else."

Ponsonby had started to reply, thought better of it, and subsided into an indignant silence, struck dumb once again by Mrs. Garvey's matter-of-fact approach to

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lift. He was not surprised that his housekeeper should be seizing every opportunity to voice a self-satisfied "I-told-you-so"; she had often predicted a bad end for Luther Cobb, the drunkard, bully, and tavern brawler who had long been Briarwood's leading ne'er-do-well. What was unsettling was that she should be so obviously pleased that the poor brute had proved at last to be a murderer as well. Or presumably so, since he had not yet been formally charged with the crime.

At the time Ponsonby had known only what all Briarwood knew about the murder of his former colleague. Professor Twining had been struck down in the library of his home on College Avenue shortly after eight o'clock on the previous Thursday evening. His assailant had used a cast-iron bookend as a weapon, then wiped it clean of fingerprints, and tossed it down beside the body before fleeing out the back door.

Professor Twining's 19-year-old daughter Ann, who kept house for her widower father, had been upstairs at the time, displaying the fruits of a recent shopping spree to a friend. Hearing the commotion downstairs, the friend had happened to glance out a window just in time to see the assailant plunge off the back porch and disappear into the shrubbery, but all she had been certain of in the dusk was that he was a big man—a description which fitted six-foot-four, two-hundred-odd pound Luther Cobb to a T.

The girls had rushed downstairs to find Professor Twining unconscious from a blow on the head, and so he had remained after surgery, until Sunday evening when he had died. But on Monday morning the rumor had raced like wildfire through Briarwood that he had regained consciousness at the last, long enough to identify his killer.

And had he named Luther Cobb, Ponsonby wondered? To one who was a faithful subscriber to both the Briarwood newspaper and Mrs. Garvey's grapevine, it seemed almost certain that he had. Not only had Cobb been seen in the Twining neighborhood on the night of the attack, but when picked up for questioning the next day he had been found to have $300 in his pocket—the precise sum which Professor Twining had withdrawn from his bank the previous morning.

At first Cobb had claimed he'd won the money in a crap game, but later, when confronted with the fact that his fingerprints had been found in the Twining library, he reluctantly admitted his presence there on the evening of the crime, insisting, however, that Professor Twining had hired him to repair his garage roof and given

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him a cash advance to buy the needed materials. Insisting, too, that he had left Twining alive and well.

"Garage roof, my Aunt Minnie!" said Mrs. Garvey suddenly, as though she had been reading Ponsonby's thoughts. She had abandoned the watering can in favor of a feather duster which she now waved indignantly at her employer. "Nobody in his right mind would hire that rumpot to fix anything, let alone give him three hundred dollars."

"It's quite possible," observed Ponsonby, "that Professor Twining was unaware of Luther Cobb's reputation. Nicholas lived in a rarefied academic atmosphere, and had little contact with such mundane phenomena as small-town gossip." Ponsonby smiled, remembering his eccentric friend. "Yes, Nicholas definitely stepped to the music of a different drummer."

"Ah, so he was a veteran, too, poor man." Mrs. Garvey had returned to her housewifely attack and was busily flicking the dust from a bust of Alexander Pope. "I wonder if maybe you shouldn't have mentioned that in your commemorable minute? I know my Billy, God rest his soul, was as proud as Punch of his part in the war."

Ponsonby glared at his housekeeper's back. "My dear woman, I was merely alluding to an oft-quoted passage from Thoreau's *Walden*. I was not implying that Professor Twining had served in the war."

"No? Was he 4-F, then? Well, I guess you wouldn't want to mention that."

Ponsonby's already ruddy complexion turned a shade ruddier. "I haven't the slightest notion, Madam, whether or not Professor Twining ever served in the armed forces, nor do I think, in so far as my faculty minute is concerned, that it matters at all."

"Of course it doesn't, love, and don't you fret about it. We're all the same at the gate of Heaven, soldier and civilian alike."

"Confound it, woman!" sputtered Ponsonby. "I didn't—I was only—it doesn't—" Only the timely peal of the doorbell saved Mrs. Garvey from one of the spirited denunciations to which the Professor occasionally subjected her, and which she good-naturedly assigned to a "sour stomach."

The man whom Mrs. Garvey ushered into the study a few moments later was in his late twenties, short and stocky, with dark curly hair and a round, almost adolescent face that to Ponsonby seemed strangely denuded without its usual grin.

"Here's Mr. Anders come to have morning coffee with us," said Mrs. Garvey. "Isn't that nice, now?"

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Ponsonby regarded his godson with concern. "Well, Paul," he said when the young man had dropped into a chair by the hearth and Mrs. Garvey had bustled off to the kitchen, "to judge by appearances you do propose to write an ode to dejection."

"I beg your pardon, Uncle Amos?"

"Nothing, my boy. I've just been writing a brief memorial to Professor Twining, and Henry David Thoreau is on my mind."

"Thoreau? I thought that was Coleridge."

"The *Ode,* yes, but I was thinking of Thoreau's one-sentence preamble to *Walden.* It goes: *I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.* I don't believe America has produced another writer who can match Thoreau's ability to compose sentences that stick in the mind."

"You mean like *The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation?*"

"My personal favorite has always been *Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.*" Ponsonby smiled; it was good to see his godson grinning again. "But tell me, Paul, why was Briarwood's newly appointed Public Defender looking so glum this morning?"

"Because he's about to go down to ignominious defeat in his first appearance as Public Defender, that's why."

"Oh? And who might the public be in this case?"

"Do you know Samuel Greatheart?"

"Ann Twining's fiancé? I've met him once or twice. And of course I've seen him play—a fine fullback. But what trouble can he possibly be in?"

"He was arrested this morning for the murder of Professor Twining."

Ponsonby stared at his godson. "Samuel Greatheart? But I thought Luther Cobb—?"

"So did the police, until a minute or so before Professor Twining died, when he regained consciousness long enough to identify his murderer."

"Do you mean he actually identified Samuel Greatheart?"

"Not by name, but he came close enough to satisfy the County Attorney." Paul pulled a paper from his inside coat pocket. "Here's a copy of the preliminary deposition made by the detective who was present when Professor Twining died. And I'm told there are two witnesses who can corroborate this, give or take a word here or there."

Ponsonby had taken the deposition and read it through, frowning over the same incriminating words he was to hear

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uttered aloud three months later in the County Courthouse ("very slow and halting," the detective had explained): *One - at - a time . . . I-did-not . . . we . . . quarrelled . . . Ann. That's-a-fallacy; that's-not-right . . . Actually it was noose . . . Indian.*

At last he lowered the paper to his lap. "But Nicholas certainly knew the young man's name. If it was Samuel Greatheart whom he meant, why didn't he come right out and say so?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll bet that the County Attorney is going to introduce medical testimony to the effect that a man who's had a bad concussion can sometimes remember most of what happened to him and still forget the commonest details—even his own name sometimes."

"But surely Samuel isn't the only Indian in Briarwood?"

"There are seventeen American Indians and two Indians from India. But even though Ann Twining refuses to believe Sam's guilty, she admits he's the only one of them her father had any contact with—the only Indian he ever even knew, she thinks. So when the police heard that, they started checking and everything just seemed to fall into place."

"What do you mean by 'everything'?"

"Well, motive for one. Sam and Ann wanted to get married and they admit Professor Twining was dead-set against it. Apparently he didn't want his daughter marrying an Indian, especially one who has nothing in the world but a football scholarship and the shirt on his back."

"Poppycock! In some ways Nicholas Twining was a very old-fashioned man and he may have thought Ann too young to marry, but he was no bigot. I'll stake my life that Samuel Greatheart's being an Indian had nothing to do with Nicholas' opposition to the match."

"Maybe not, Uncle Amos, but Sam himself admits to having had a couple of blazing rows with him about it, and anyone who's seen him play football knows he's got an unholy temper. I also understand the County Attorney can produce a witness who'll testify to having heard Professor Twining refer to Sam as 'that damned Indian,' so apparently there was no love lost on his side, either."

"Nonsense! When we're vexed with someone we all choose the readiest handle for our whip. In my mind I refer to Mrs. Garvey as 'that damned woman' twenty times a week, but I certainly don't intend it as a serious indictment of either her or her sex."

Paul grinned. "I didn't think you two ever quarreled."

"Oh, we have our—" Ponsonby stiffened. "What was that?"

"I said I thought everything was always sweetness and light

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between you two." Paul regarded his godfather quizzically. "Why? Did I say something wrong?"

"No. No, it's just that for a moment there—" Ponsonby hesitated, frowning uncertainly; then he dismissed the interruption with a wave of his hand. "But tell me, what else do they have against Samuel Greatheart?"

"Well, there's opportunity. Sam says he was in his room from seven o'clock on that evening studying for a physics exam, but even though there are one hundred and fifty other boys in that dorm and Sam knows most of them, he can't produce a single witness to his being there. On top of which he failed that exam the next day, even though physics is a subject he generally does well in. Of course he blames it on his being upset over his row with Professor Twining."

"As understandably he would be."

"Yes, but wouldn't it be even more understandable if he'd almost killed a man the night before?"

Ponsonby regarded his godson speculatively. "Tell me, Paul, you sound as though you think he's guilty. Do you?"

Paul Anders leaned forward in his chair, propping his elbows on his knees. "I don't know what to think, Uncle Amos. I want to believe him, and when I talked with him this morning he sounded so darned sincere I couldn't help but believe him. But then I walked out of that cell and came right up against a deathbed confession. Some detective says, 'Who did it?' and Professor Twining says *Indian,* and it's the last thing he ever does say. How can I explain that to a jury even if I do believe Sam myself? What sort of defense can I possibly hope to offer?"

"Well, I would certainly look into the whereabouts of those other nineteen Indians. And I would certainly throw Luther Cobb at the jury as a far more likely candidate for murder. And when you consider all the evidence against Cobb—a man with a history of violence, whose fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime, who turned up the next day with the victim's money in his pocket, then lied about how he'd come by it."

Paul shook his head disconsolately. "That's all just circumstantial evidence, Uncle Amos. It couldn't stand up against a deathbed identification."

Ponsonby snorted. "*Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.*"

Paul grinned. "Say, that's good. Do you mind if I use it sometime?"

"If you do, be sure to credit our friend Thoreau. That's another of his gems—from his *Journal,* I believe."

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Ponsonby realized with a start that the courtroom crowd was stirring, stretching, getting to its feet. "What's happening?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Recess until ten o'clock tomorrow," said a man beside him.

Ponsonby glanced at the front of the room. The judge and jury had gone and Paul was seated again at the defense table in a brow-to-brow huddle with his client. "Damn it all!" he thought. "I've been woolgathering all through the lad's cross-examination."

"Well, you didn't miss much," his godson assured him an hour later on Ponsonby's front porch, cool drinks in hand and the aroma of Mrs. Garvey's dinner preparations wafting faintly through the screen door.

"Then you couldn't shake the sergeant's testimony?" Ponsonby asked.

"No more than I was able to shake the nurse and the orderly. Oh, I got the sergeant to repeat how halting Professor Twining's delivery was that night, and how hard it was to tell whether he was mumbling words or just gasping for breath. And I managed to emphasize what the sergeant kept calling his 'dopey expression'—you know, as though the Professor's mind had really been somewhere else.

"But that won't be enough to save Sam. All the County Attorney has to do is point out to the jury what a monstrous coincidence it would be, if Professor Twining was really just mumbling delirious nonsense, that out of the half million words in the English language he just happened to hit on *Indian* as the last one he ever spoke. And if he wasn't just mumbling deliriously, what was he more likely trying to say than 'it was that Indian who hit me and someone ought to make a noose and string him up'—or something like that."

"Nonsense! Nicholas would never have been that bloodthirsty. And as for coincidence, if Samuel Greatheart is innocent, then there has to be a coincidence of some sort involved. There virtually always is in a miscarriage of justice—look at those poor devils who've gone to prison because they just happened to look like someone else and been unable to account for their whereabouts when that someone else was committing a crime. What are the odds against that occurring? And yet it has, and all too often.

"But I don't think the coincidence here lies in that last word, Paul; doubtless Nicholas had some reason for saying it, even if we never know what it was. No, I think the coincidence here is that out of sixteen hundred Briarwood students, it just happened to be one of our nineteen

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Indians who was courting Ann Twining. If Samuel Greatheart were an Oriental or a Caucasian he wouldn't even be on trial, but he happens to be a Shoshone, and so he is about to be condemned by one u n f o r t u n a t e word."

"But a last word, Uncle Amos. Maybe you don't realize the weight a dying man's words carry with a jury, but it's far beyond their normal significance, believe me. It's about as though a jury considers a dying man to be half an angel already, and more or less speaking from two worlds at once."

"Oh, I recognize the fascination that deathbed utterances hold for the liv—" Ponsonby froze. Suddenly he shouted, "Not t w o worlds!"

Paul almost dropped his drink. "What the devil—?"

"Not 'two worlds,' Paul, but 'one world'! That's what Nicholas was trying to say! It has to be, don't you see? Because the rest of it—*I did not* and *we* and *quarreled*—they all fit so perfectly! My God, what a ninny I've been! Going around for months with that young man's salvation staring me in the face and if it hadn't been for your chance remark just now I might have overlooked it altogether!"

Both men were on their feet, Ponsonby heading for the door, Paul close on his heels.

"Uncle Amos, what the devil are you talking about?"

"The fact that N i c h o l a s Twining wasn't replying to those people at his bedside, my boy." Ponsonby spoke over his shoulder as he led the way into his study. "His thoughts were a century away, dwelling on a man whom he had loved all his life and virtually lived with for the last four years of it. Have you ever written a book, Paul, one that demands exhaustive research? Do you have any idea how completely such a task can consume your every waking thought when y o u ' r e deeply involved in it? And, ninny that I am, Ann Twining even mentioned to me one time that her father had just started work on the final chapter of his *Life of Thoreau* the day he was attacked. And that's the chapter, don't you see, that most likely was to tell of Thoreau's death?"

"Thoreau? Then you mean—?"

"I mean that Nicholas Twining was thinking about Henry David Thoreau! And what more natural than that a man who probably sensed he was dying should let his last thoughts drift back to the dying words of a man whom he had admired in life above all others?"

Ponsonby selected a t h i c k volume from one of his crowded shelves and began hastily thumbing through it. "This is a more popular than a scholarly bi-

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ography, but all the more reason they should be here. That's what's so blasted annoying—I know I've read them a hundred times, my boy; they're b o t h well-known literary anecdotes, two deathbed sallies as memorable in their way as anything Thoreau ever wrote, and—yes, here's one of them." And Ponsonby read aloud:

"Shortly before the end, the fiery anti-slavery orator, Parker Pillsbury, visited the sick room and remarked to his dying friend, 'You seem so near the brink of the dark river, that I almost wonder how the opposite shore may appear to you.' But Thoreau's characteristic sense of humor had not deserted him, and he replied dryly: 'One world at a time.'

"Don't you r e m e m b e r, Paul?—Nurse Gebhorn thought that Nicholas had mumbled some other word in that sentence and not just been gasping for breath. And of course she was right; he was trying to say, *One world at a time.*

"But I don't see what that has to do with a—a hanging Indian!"

"And the other anecdote ought to be here, too," c o n t i n u e d Ponsonby. "Yes, here it is." And again he read aloud:

"As death drew near, his pious Aunt Louisa, a devout Calvinist, asked him if he had made his peace with God. Thoreau's reply stands as a fitting epitaph for this questing, rebellious man who had lived all his forty-four years in 'the infinite expectation of the dawn.' Said he: 'I did not know we had ever quarreled, Aunt.' "

Ponsonby closed the book with a snap and beamed triumphantly at his godson. "Don't you see?—it wasn't *Ann* that Nicholas was mumbling, as the sergeant testified, nor was it *and,* as Nurse Gebhorn thought. It was *Aunt—I did not know we had ever quarreled, Aunt*—and the orderly was right all along."

Paul spoke quietly, spacing his words deliberately, as though he were a teacher trying to get through to a retarded child: "But what does all that have to do with a noose and an Indian?"

"Why, it ought to be obvious, my boy. Don't you r e c a l l Nicholas' next remark? It was, *That's a fallacy; that's not right.* In other words, those t w o remarks, although both have been presented as Thoreau's d y i n g words, are not his last words. Which words—"

"Had something to do with a noose and an Indian?"

"Perhaps."

"That would be great, Uncle Amos! Go on!"

"Go on?"

"Yes. Read me the part about the hanging Indian, for Pete's sake!"

Ponsonby calmly returned the book to its place on the shelf. "There's nothing here about that,

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my boy—what I read was the closing paragraph of this particular biography. As a matter of fact, I don't recall ever having read a remark about hanging an Indian."

Paul Anders stared at his godfather. "Do you mean to say you don't actually know that Thoreau's last words were something about a noose and an Indian? That you've led me on like this, building up my hopes, without really remembering anything of the sort?"

"The fact that I don't recall having read it certainly doesn't mean it isn't so, my boy. American literature has never been my specialty. Now I can tell you that William Cowper died asking, 'What does it signify?' and that Robert Burns passed away muttering, 'That damned rascal, Matthew Penn!' and that the last words spoken by Lord Chesterfield were 'Give Dayrolles a chair,' because I happen to have done extensive biographical research on those gentlemen. But I'm familiar with only the broad facts of Thoreau's life."

"But great Scott, Uncle Amos, I can't go before that jury and argue that Professor Twining was obviously thinking about Thoreau's last words, and since they weren't this and they weren't that, they must have been something about hanging an Indian. I'd be laughed out of court!"

"Tut, tut, my boy, don't carry on so. You ought to know by now that the true measure of an education is not what you can remember, but how adept you are at finding things out. And since Nicholas Twining had obviously learned from some source what Thoreau's last words actually were, I suggest we start our search in his library. Mrs. Garvey!"

Ponsonby turned to his housekeeper just as she appeared in the doorway to announce dinner. "Put the dinner back in the oven, my good woman, and then phone Ann Twining to say that Paul and I are on our way over. Tell her we're on the trail of information which may clear her fiancé"—Ponsonby noted the gathering storm on Mrs. Garvey's brow—" and almost certainly lead to the ultimate incarceration of that black-hearted scoundrel, Luther Cobb!"

"It's no use, Uncle Amos," said Paul two hours later. "We've been through these books three times, and there's nothing in any of them about Thoreau's wanting to hang an Indian—or not wanting to hang one, which would seem more likely from some of the things we've read."

Paul and Ann were sitting cross-legged on the floor of the Twining library, surrounded by books on Thoreau, while Ponsonby perched atop his late col-

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league's shelf-ladder, scanning the upper shelves for any book they might have overlooked.

Their search had uncovered many facts about Thoreau's last year of life. They had learned that ten months before his death he had traveled to Minnesota and there for the first time had visited a frontier Indian village; they discovered that in his final weeks he had been working steadily on the manuscript-account of several earlier journeys to the Maine woods, where Indian guides had been among his close companions; they learned that in his last days, in spite of an illness which all knew must soon prove fatal, he had visited many friends and spoken often about his admiration for the Indian people and his indignation at the way the nation had treated them.

They had found the origin of the *One world at a time* anecdote in the voluminous *Journals* of Bronson Alcott, and had come upon the source of the *I didn't know we'd quarreled* in a slim volume by Edward Emerson, entitled *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend.*

But they had found no reference to a *noose* and an *Indian.*

"It's no use," repeated Paul disconsolately. "We've been hunting for something that just doesn't exist."

"Nonsense! Consider what we've already established about those other two deathbed quotations. Now Bronson Alcott—that would be Louisa May Alcott's father — and Edward Emerson — Ralph Waldo Emerson's son — were both personal friends of Thoreau's, so there's little doubt that Thoreau did make the remarks they attributed to him. But you will notice that neither account purports to be setting down Thoreau's last words, nor even to be reporting an incident from the day of his death."

"Which doesn't prove anything about what his last words really were."

"Perhaps not, but—" Ponsonby paused, frowning. "Ann, are you quite certain that we've checked all your father's books on Thoreau? What about the source materials he was actually working with the day he was attacked? Were there no books on his desk or perhaps scattered about this room?"

"There might have been," said Ann, whose mounting disappointment during the search had been even more evident than Paul's. "I remember putting some things in a cardboard box and pushing it—yes, there it is."

Scrambling to her feet, Ann crossed the room and pulled a carton from under her father's desk. She placed it on the desk, opened it, and lifted out a small

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pile of books and papers.

The top item was a slim brown volume; Ann glanced at the cover. "*Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist,*" she read aloud, "by William Ellery Channing." She handed it to Ponsonby atop his ladder perch. "Who was he?"

"A close friend of Thoreau's. A fellow poet and fellow maverick who might well have asked Thoreau's mother or sister to describe his good friend's final—ahh!"

Ponsonby's half sigh, half exclamation acted like a magnet on the attention of his companions, but not until he had spent several long tense minutes in silent reading did he finally end their suspense.

"Here we are, children," he said at last. "Your father had even marked the place, Ann—the book fell open to it in my hand. It's Channing's report of Thoreau's last few moments of life, and the lines we've been searching for are these:

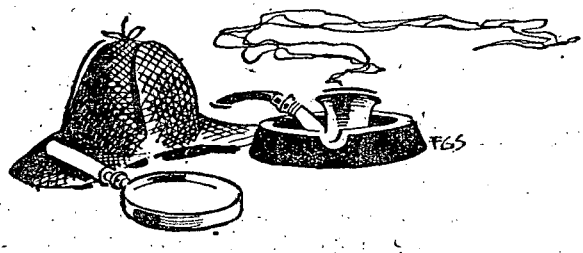
"The last sentence he incompletely spoke contained but two distinct words: *moose* and *Indians,* showing how fixed in his mind was that relation. Then the world he had so long sung and delighted in faded tranquilly away from his eyes and hearing, till on that beautiful spring morning of May 6th, 1862, it closed on him."

Long after he had finished reading, the echo of Ponsonby's voice seemed to linger in the air of the hushed library. At last Paul broke the silence.

"Moose," he said softly.

"Indians," whispered Ann.

Gently, Ponsonby closed the book.



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 345th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . An off-trail, change-of-pace story that you will find provocative and puzzling. Our reading staff came up with four different interpretations. Which meaning will you think the correct one? Or will you come up with a fifth explanation? . . .

The author, Elizabeth Palmer, is in her late forties and a housewife. She and her husband are New Yorkers, and during most of her adult years Elizabeth Palmer "worked in or on the periphery of the publishing world." Her writing had been "intermittent," and in the past few years she has written several stories which she "didn't enjoy and subsequently tore up." (Which may be a great pity—who knows what she may have mistakenly destroyed?) Finally she decided to combine two genres she "dearly loves—fantasy and mystery fiction."

Further comment after you've read Elizabeth Palmer's story . . .

POST-OBIT

by ELIZABETH PALMER

I AM BEGINNING THIS RECORD primarily to prove to myself that I am able still to put coherent words on paper. I must decide if I have to deal with the truly fantastic or some nightmare creation of my own. If I am mad and they cart me off one day, at least the doctors can read this and it may help them to know the nature of my delusion.

That ghosts might be a subject for serious consideration had never crossed my mind, and this of course left me totally unprepared for my present predicament.

I read constantly, but my material is dictated mostly by my research needs and the desire to keep myself up to date on the work of my fellow historians. This covers a great deal of ground, but never has it provided me with information on the supernatural.

My extracurricular reading has included a bit of M. R. James, Walter de la Mare, Arthur

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Machen, and a few others, but none of them made a lasting impression on me. They hardly equipped me to deal personally with a ghost. My religious training, completely conventional and rather dimly remembered, has served me no better.

I think tonight I will try to describe this apparition. Seeing him transposed into precise, unemotional type may help me to retain my shaken grip on reality.

He seemed—still seems—so real, so solid, that at first I could not believe he was anything but flesh and blood. He stands at least six feet under a crop of startlingly blond hair. There is nothing misty or wavery about him. When he appears he is as much of a presence as my big oak desk. His features are pleasant; his extremely blue eyes express intelligence and promise humor. He looks like a man whose company I could enjoy despite an age difference of possibly 25 years and the fact that my bald pate reaches only to his chin.

He seems about 35 and very fit. If that last sounds ridiculous I can't help it. That is exactly how he looks, fit and healthy. He doesn't moan or clank. Sometimes he whistles softly. He doesn't drift, he strides. One of the first emotions I was conscious of, after I had ascertained that he was indeed spectral, was resentment. What right has a ghost to look like that! According to my admittedly limited knowledge it is completely unorthodox. I think this prime-of-life aspect upsets me more than anything else. Perhaps I concentrate on resentment to help combat the terror that threatens to overwhelm me.

Looking back at what I wrote last night, it does help me to be more objective to see him described in uncompromising typewriter type. So I will continue.

I began to suspect the truth when I discovered he could neither see nor hear me. I will admit that for some days I almost accepted the premise that I was losing—or had lost—my mind. Then I made certain that solid though he might look, he was *nothing but a phantom*. I tried to attract his attention by putting my hand on his arm. Of course it took a while to get up enough courage to do this. Frankly, it took almost a week, but he did not appear every evening.

This past Friday, I think it was, I felt I could no longer just watch him. I had given up shouting and waving my arms. So I touched his sleeve—and felt nothing. After this I had to sit down for a bit. I tried again to touch him. This time I actually grabbed his hand—my fingers closed on air.

Since then I have put my hand

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on his several times, impelled by a horrible fascination and an increasing desire to study more carefully this incredible phenomenon. After each of the first two attempts I was too aghast to note any reaction on his part, but later I noticed that when I seemingly touched him he did look up from his book and glance quickly round the room. I could also see he was having trouble settling down to his unearthly reading again.

One of the weirdest aspects of this whole affair is that I can hear as well as see him. I can *hear* him! I can hear him turn the pages of his book; I can hear the glass he usually has by him click on my metal coaster. I can hear him yawn, sigh, and as I said before, occasionally whistle.

He does not always come in to the library to read. Sometimes he sits at my desk and writes letters. These he always carefully seals and takes out of the room with him somewhere into limbo, so I have been unable to find out whether or not I am able to read them. I must confess I would feel hesitant thus to invade his privacy. This has also kept me from looking over his shoulder as he writes. He is so vulnerable, so totally unaware, poor fellow.

By now I have completely accepted the fact that he *is* a ghost. Certainly there is nothing in my recent or distant past to account for my suddenly going mad. Nevertheless, I may *go* mad if this continues, and oddly enough it will be because of the aura of complete normality about the manifestation. If he had appeared in a Cavalier's costume, or possibly a Nineteenth Century frock coat, I could have moved quickly from horror and shock to curiosity, and finally, I am sure, to actual enjoyment of the situation. But he is so unmistakably contemporary in his sports jacket and gray slacks. This stranger who makes my home his own is no revenant from another era.

I hardly sleep at all these nights. I spend most of my time in the library. If he is not there ahead of me I wait for him, although frequently he does not appear. I never see my interloper in the rest of the house. Only in this room.

Tonight perhaps I will rest more easily. I think I might at last have the answer. He must have lived in this house at one time, and the reason he appears only in this room is that he loved it as much as I do. His most satisfying hours must have been spent here. That is why he is irresistibly drawn back to this one spot.

Maybe his desk was about where mine is, as well as his

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favorite chair. After all, I placed mine in the most logical places. This is my sanctuary and I take care of it myself. My housekeeper is never allowed in here. Perhaps he felt the same way. Pitiful lost soul, it must represent the only refuge he can now find.

I have often speculated that the architect who designed this room created it with genuine affection. Records show it was added some years after the house was built. As the Elizabethan Age is my speciality I expected to loathe this unabashed reproduction when it was first described to me. However, it won me over as soon as I stepped into it. It was designed with exquisite taste and restraint: the paneling, the leaded glass, the huge fireplace—none of it seemed too much. And to a collector like myself, the crowded book shelves covering two walls more than made up for any lack of authenticity.

I am trying to remember what I have heard about the owner just before me. That would go back only ten years. Contemporary enough.

Watching him sip his drink tonight, I realize I have actual proof of his ghostliness apart from my inability to communicate with him. When I leave the library late at night, the ashtray is full if he has been there, the glass sitting beside it. When I return the next evening, the ashtray is empty and spotless, the glass clean and standing back with the others. I purposely touch nothing, so obviously these subsidiary illusions only manifest themselves when he materializes. All I do now before I leave the room is dust the desk and lamp and take a final gratifying look round at the books. One of the compensations for being a bachelor is that no one ever barges in to rearrange and disturb things. It's a good life.

I am becoming so used to sharing my library with my phantom that he no longer frightens me. I feel only compassion. How he must yearn for his earthly retreat to have achieved this much of a return—a thought I find chilling. Nevertheless, I am accomplishing nothing. The strain of this unexplained apparition keeps me constantly on edge. I am a little hazy as to how long ago I first saw him, but from that night on I have found it understandably difficult to concentrate on my work. Aside from this record I have not written a word. Obviously I will have to do something about him soon as he has completely disrupted my life.

Perhaps he will just disappear as unexpectedly as he appeared. I notice he too has been increasingly restless of late. He keeps putting down his book and getting up to pace the room. Also he

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is taking two or three ghostly drinks a night instead of his usual one. And he is not appearing as often. I have a feeling he will be forced to leave me before too long. I only hope he finds what he needs elsewhere, and I wish him Godspeed.

Last night I decided to call the real estate agent who sold me this house and ask about the former owner. However, I cannot remember the agent's name. It will come back to me and then I will investigate. Perhaps some tragedy took place here, or some crime. I will have to find out if I am ever again going to settle down to a normal existence. I have been so absorbed by this monstrous problem I am at times hardly conscious of the world outside. All that interests me is getting back to this room every evening.

I don't quite know why I am adding these final pages to my record. I have the answer to my mystery, to my ghost. At first I laughed aloud. What a stupendous joke! Then I wept. It was a tragedy after all.

I got my answer just a short time ago. When I came in tonight I immediately noticed something new in the room. A sleek ivory telephone sat on one corner of my ponderous old desk. I had never had a phone in this room. It would have been an intrusion. But evidently my predecessor had one. So far his personal manifestations had not appeared until he did. Tonight was obviously going to be a more complicated visitation. Possibly an anniversary of the tragedy I have surmised.

By the time he came through the door I was trembling. The situation had become so familiar, so predictable; but now a new note was to be introduced. I was again threatened by the unknown.

Tonight he did not take up a book at all. He stood in the middle of the room and looked slowly around. Then he gave a shrug that was almost a shudder and walked over to the telephone. He lifted the receiver and dialed. I could hear it all. That is the part I still cannot reconcile. I cannot actually touch him but I can hear him.

His conversation I record here. I was stunned,—but only for a few moments. Subconsciously I must have begun to suspect his true story sometime ago. And when I heard it I never doubted it *was* the truth. I knew.

"Roger? Alec here. I'm calling from the house. The phones were put in today. Listen, Rog, I can't take it any more. I'm moving out."

The phone squeaked a few times.

"I *know* it's everything I wanted—even furniture after Sylvia took ours. This whole setup is ideal. And you know how I

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felt about the books in the library. God, what a room! But what's the use of having it if I can't enjoy it!"

He listened a moment. "Yes, yes, I know. It could be imagination, but every instinct I have tells me it isn't. There is something in or about this room that stands my hair on end every time I'm in it. It's not that I'm scared exactly. I don't think there's anything—anything evil; but I can't get over the feeling I'm never alone, and it's driving me nuts!

"Laugh all you want but, much as I hate to be corny, this room was to have been a sanctuary for me; now it's not that at all—it's a place of—of danger, peril."

This time he listened for more than a minute.

"Well, maybe I rented it too quickly. I should have come back a couple of times, but it's such a wonderful old house it wouldn't have been on the market a week. Remember, I heard about Professor Matthews through the university long before they had decided what to do with the place. If I hadn't spoken up then, I'd never have got it. Then to be able to have the use of his entire library besides! I just *had* to jump at it."

He paused. "Funny, I never laid eyes on the guy, but sometimes when I look out the front window of this room . . . He was hit right in front of the house, you know. I swear I can almost see him hurrying across to his library for the last time."

The telephone crackled.

"No, I mean *library*. Hell, Rog, all you have to do is spend an hour in this room and you know the rest of the house was no more than a blur to him. This was an ivory tower to end all ivory towers." My ghost sighed heavily. "I know as well as you do that his leaving everything to the university was a tremendous stroke of luck for me as his successor, but I wish it had come about some other way. Damn it, this room is still *his!*"

After another pause he nodded. "I guess you're right. Well, I'll give it another week. Then if I haven't been able to talk myself out of it I'll leave. Thanks, Rog. See you."

Now I have to leave my room, my books. As I look down at the pages I have written I realize that either they will never be seen, or if they exist they will probably be blank. So be it. They were my shock absorbers.

I find my cheeks still wet with tears, but most of the fear has gone. I am calm. And now that I know, I realize there must be something ahead. I have, after all, come this far.

(signed) John Kingsley Matthews, B.A., M.A., Ph.D.

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EDITORIAL COMMENT: Our reading staff's four different interpretations were: first, and most obvious, that the "ghost" is merely an hallucination, no more; second, that the ghost and Dr. Matthews are somehow one and the same; third, that this is the story of a crease or fold in Time, a disjointment or overlapping of Time; and fourth, that it is not Alec who is the ghost—Alec is alive and it is Dr. Matthews who is the ghost (a neat switch!).

No doubt some of you came up with other explanations.

But surely this type of story should end with an air of mystery. So all we'll say further is that we think the main clue to the correct interpretation lies in the very first thing the author gave you—the title of the story, *Post-Obit* . . .

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THE BALLAD OF CORPSCANDAL MANOR

by CELIA FREMLIN

His Lordship is locked in the library,
Guests lurk around in the hall;
Inspector McNosey, backed up by Aunt Rosie,
Can't understand it at all.

Everyone there has a motive—
His Lordship is wealthy as sin.
From Gramp to young Jane, they would all stand to gain
If milord was done (tactfully) in.

And then there's that odd-looking couple
Who've turned up from no one knows where;
And it's rather peculiar that Harold's niece, Julia,
Should suddenly choose to be there.

The library windows are fastened;
There isn't a trap in the floor;
The guests in the hall swear that no one at all
Has passed through the library door.

The mystery deepens, and thickens;
The butler says, "Dinner is served."
The hero once more tries the library door—
Then hesitates, somewhat unnerved—

For the door has swung silently open—
He staggers back into the hall—
For his Lordship sits there, to the author's despair—
And nothing has happened at all!

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Quite unintentionally, be assured, I blundered and misled you. It is hard to understand in what strange absence of mind or loss of mind I called A.A. Milne the only writer ever elected to the London Detection Club on the strength of one novel alone. And I did it twice, in successive months, without realizing what had been said. If I looked up from the typewriter, I could have seen among books against the opposite wall a copy of E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case.*

Trent's Last Case had established itself as a detective classic before the outbreak of World War I. When Anthony Berkeley founded the Detection Club in 1932, E.C. Bentley became a charter member. Our club's first president, the great G.K. Chesterton, died four years later; and every member voted for Bentley to succeed him. Though during that same year '36 the creator of Philip Trent wrote *Trent's Own Case* in collaboration with H. Warner Allen, and afterwards provided the Strand Magazine with a short-story series collected as *Trent Intervenes,* at the time he was elected club president by acclamation he could show only the solitary, blazing beacon of 1913.

Edmund Clerihew Bentley (1875-1956) had many talents. We who knew him remember him well: blurly, quiet-voiced, always with a twinkle in his eye. He wrote *Greedy Night,* that burlesque of a Lord Peter Wimsey adventure which remains at once the funniest and most ingenious parody extant, being both parody and capsule detective story with all the clues. He also invented the casual, adroit verse-form called a clerihew. Thus:

"Mr. Cecil B. De Mille,
Sorely against his will,
Was persuaded to leave Moses
Out of the Wars of the Roses."

At the club's annual dinner thirty-two years ago, held at Grosvenor House, Park Lane, in May of 1938, the principal speaker was an eminent barrister, Norman Birkett, in later years raised to the peerage as Lord Birkett, but even then hero of so many courtroom

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triumphs, especially as counsel for the defense. Bentley introduced him with a characteristic flourish.

"Mr. Norman Birkett
Travelled the Midland Circuit;
He always got the best briefs
For defending thiefs."

Whereupon distinguished counsel arose to demonstrate that this was sober truth, citing his frequent and usually successful efforts to keep out of clink a little pickpocket named Joe. Bentley capped it with a very funny account of the occasion when the British Ambassador to Germany, attending a reception at the home of Field Marshal Goering, had his watch stolen by the Minister of Propaganda, Dr. Josef Goebbels.

It is appropriate that this month's presiding genius should be Bentley's. For once I can offer you four true detective novels, each admirably written and with evidence in full sight. The first and last come from America, the middle two from Britain. Three are new; the fourth, first published little more than a year ago, has just appeared in paperback.

With *The Last Woman in His Life,* by Ellery Queen (World, $5.95) both Ellery the author and Ellery the detective return to the sort of investigation they for so long have strenuously pursued. Outside Wrightsville, that New England witches' cauldron, is one estate of International Playboy Johnny Benedict, who supports three ex-wives and has his eye on a prospective fourth. All three ex-wives are present, together with his tough-minded lawyer and the latter's secretary, when Johnny B. is struck down amid a profusion of clues which may indicate one of those wives or the whole trio together.

We are not far from desperation. A new will, sometimes less a will than a will-o'-the-wisp, floats in the background. The solution is very tricky, and should fool you completely; at least, it fooled me. You may not like this book as well as you liked, say, *Calamity Town* or *Ten Days' Wonder.* And yet any connoisseur can do nothing but admire.

Bentley would have enjoyed the humor and charm as well as the ingenuity of *Many Deadly Returns,* by Patricia Moyes (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $4.50). Crystal, Lady Balaclava, was once a leader of those Bright Young People who caused their elders so much misgiving in the dizzy nineteen twenties. Time has not dimmed the lady's spirit. Widowed, still wealthy despite taxation,

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she lives on in that white monstrosity of a country house, with all her bad manners intact.

To celebrate her seventieth birthday, Lady Balaclava's three handsome daughters—one married to a Swiss doctor, the second to a Dutch rose-grower, the third to an American millionaire—arrive from abroad with their customary gifts. Because she fears some hovering menace undefined, old friends of hers in high places send an old friend of ours now Detective Superintendent Henry Tibbett, who with his common-sense wife will keep an eye on the ceremony.

We must all watch closely. The birthday party and tea party becomes a Mad Tea Party with fatal overtones merging into uproar. Can any victim be poisoned when she has ingested no toxic substance? Don't fear cheating; Miss Moyes is too sound a workman to fall back on 'mysterious poisons unknown to science.' There will be a way as well as clues to that way, if we are alert and on guard. And the author has written another first-class story, which discerning readers must not miss.

Though not without faults, Margaret Erskine's *The Case of Mary Fielding* (Crime Club, $4.50) employs straight detection and has strong emotional impact. The presence of beautiful Mary Fielding, battered to death four years before our story opens, can still be felt in the Sussex village where she lived amid friends and relatives as suspicious-looking as picturesque.

Whether or not Gerald Holt communicated with her on some psychic wave-length, the séance that afternoon forms only a prelude to other deeds of blood until Chief Inspector Finch reads their riddle and expounds the truth. Distinctly worth-while.

Though they failed to send me the book in hardcover, this edition of *Sunday the Rabbi Stayed Home,* by Harry Kemelman (Fawcett, 75¢) should please everybody as the third case for that likable cleric, Rabbi David Small of Barnard's Crossing, Mass., who encounters dirty work on his doorstep as inevitably as though he were an urban lieutenant of homicide.

Once more, from the beginning, civil war threatens among his parishoners. Though I can claim little knowledge of Judaism, Rabbi Small's flock sounds very much like the congregation of the Presbyterian Church in which I was brought up. They bicker, they argue, they come almost to blows before natural simmering-down restores their balance. Here are credible human beings entangled in a web of marijuana and murder, with Rabbi Small drawing triumphant conclusions from evidence we should have seen.

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Winner of a SPECIAL AWARD in the CWA contest

CHRISTIANNA BRAND

Very few writers—in our opinion, too few—are producing the kind of detective story that Christianna Brand specializes in: novelets, each presenting a highly intricate mystery, with a wide range of possible answers, every theory pursued, analyzed, discarded, until only one solution covering all the facts remains—and even then, beware! These fascinating merry-go-round, teeter-totter, crossruff, tightrope novelets are "renaissance" detective stories—relish them!

THE SCAPEGOAT

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

"STAY ME WITH FLAGONS," said Mr. Mysterioso, waving a fluid white hand, "comfort me with apples!" There had been no flagons, he admitted, in that murder room fifteen years ago, but there had been apples—a brown paper bag of them, tied at the top with string and so crammed full that three had burst out of a hole in the side and rolled away on the dusty floor; and a rifle, propped up, its sights aligned on the cornerstone, seventy-odd yards away and two stories below.

And at the foot of the cornerstone the Grand Mysterioso tumbled with his lame leg doubled up under him, clasping in his arms the dying man who for so many years had been his dresser, chauffeur, servant, and friend—who for the last five years, since the accident that had crippled Mr Mysterioso, had almost literally never left his side—tumbled there, holding the dying man to his breast, roaring defiance at the building opposite, from which the shot had come. "You fools, you murderers, you've got the wrong

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man!" And then he had bent his head to listen. "Dear God, he's saying—he's saying—come close, listen to him! He's saying, 'Thank God they only got me. It was meant for you.'"

Fifteen years ago—a cornerstone to be laid for the local hospital, just another chore in the public life of Mr. Mysterioso, stage magician extraordinary. But mounting to the tiny platform, leaning his crippled weight on the servant's arm, there had come the sharp crack of the rifle shot. And in the top-floor room of the unfinished hospital wing, looking down on the scene, they had found the fixed rifle with one spent bullet. And nobody there. Up on the roof a press photographer who couldn't have got down to the window where the gun was fixed; down at the main entrance a policeman on duty, seen by a dozen pairs of eyes; tearing up the stairs toward the murder room, moments after the shot. In all that large, open, easily searched building—not another soul.

Fifteen years ago; and now they were gathered together, eight of them—to talk it all over, to try to excise the scar that had formed in the mind of the young man whose father had been dismissed from the force "for negligence on duty," had ever afterward suffered from the results of the act that day, and who now was dead.

For the young man had developed an obsession of resentment against the only other person involved, the man on the roof, who nowadays called himself "Mr. Photoze"—whose first step on the road to fame had come with the picture he had taken that day of the lion head raised, the brilliant eyes glaring, the outraged defiance. "My father didn't fire that shot—therefore you must have," was the burden of the young man's message, and there had been a succession of threats and at last a physical attack.

They had sent him to see a psychiatrist and the psychiatrist had muttered darkly about paranoia and complexes and "a disturbed oedipal pattern—the young man is subconsciously jealous of the father's domination of the mother, which seems to have been considerable. He feels guilty towards the father and now seeks to cover up the recollection of his inner hatred by an exaggerated feeling of protection towards the father, now that the father is dead and unable, as it were, to protect himself." A long period of treatment, said the psychiatrist, would be necessary.

Half an hour of treatment, said Mr. Photoze to his friend Mysterioso, would be more like it. Once convince the young man—"Hold a little court, get together some of the people who were present and talk it out."

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"The very thing!" Mysterioso had agreed, delighted. It would be entertaining; he was an old man now, long retired from the stage. It would give him something to do, sitting here crippled and helpless in his chair all day.

So here they were, gathered together in Mr. Mysterioso's large lush apartment: Mysterioso himself and Inspector Block who as a young constable had been on the scene of the crime; and a lady and gentleman who had been on the hospital balcony and seen the young policeman running up the stairs after the shot had been fired; and a lady who had been close to the site and seen and heard it all. And a once-lovely lady, Miss Marguerite Devine, the actress, who might also have something to say; and Mr. Photoze. Mr. Photoze was madly decorative in dress, and a half dozen fine gold bracelets jingled every time he moved his arm.

The young man sat hunched against an arm of the sofa, strained against it as though something dangerous to him crouched at the other end. He hated them. He didn't want their silly help; he wanted to be avenged on Mr. Photoze who had committed a crime and got off scot-free, as a result of which his father had lost his job and his happiness and his faith in men. And his mind wandered back over the frightening, uneasy childhood, the endless bickering and recrimination over his too perceptive young head; the indigence, the sense of failure . . . "I don't want to hear all this, I know what I know. Because of what he did, my father's life was ruined. I meant all those threats. I failed last time, but next time I'll get him."

"You do *see*!" said Mr. Photoze, appealing to the rest of them with outflung arms and a tinkling of gold.

"Your father was never accused of anything," said Inspector Block. "He was dismissed—"

"'Dismissed for negligence'—everyone knew what that meant. He lived under suspicion till the day he died."

"We are going to lift that suspicion," said Mysterioso. "That's what we're here for; we're going to clear the whole thing up. You shall represent your father, Mr. Photoze will be in the dock with you, defending himself. And here we have our witnesses—who also will be our jury. And I shall be the judge. If in the end we all come to the conclusion that your father was innocent, and Mr. Photoze was innocent also, won't you feel better?" He said very kindly, "We only want to help you."

The young man watched him warily. He's not doing this for my sake, he thought. He's doing it because he wants to be on a

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stage again and this is the nearest he can get to it. He's just a vain, conceited old man; he wants to show off.

A vain man, yes: a man consumed with vanity—enormously handsome once, with the tawny great mane, now almost white, a man of world-wide fame, a great performer—and not only on stage if his boastings were at all to be trusted—despite the fact that the auto accident at the height of his career had left him unable to walk more than a few steps unaided. It was whispered behind mocking hands that on romantic occasions his servant Tom had to lead him to the very bedside and lower him down to it. Certainly he was never seen in public without Tom: a walking stick was not enough and as for a crutch, "Do you see me hopping about playing Long John Silver?" Close to Tom, gripping Tom's strong left arm, the lameness was hardly noticeable. On stage he had continued to manage brilliantly with the aid of cleverly positioned props which he could hold on to or lean against. It was a total lack of strength only; he suffered no pain . . .

Mysterioso gave three knocks on the table by his side—the three knocks that usher in the judge in Central Criminal Court Number One at the Old Bailey. "We'll take first the evidence of the police."

Inspector Block, paying lip service to all this foolishness, was interested nevertheless to see the outcome. "May it please your lordship, members of the jury. Fifteen years ago, almost to this very day, the police were shown an anonymous letter which had been received by the famous stage magician, Mr. Mysterioso. It was the first of a dozen or so, over the next six months. They were composed of words cut out from the national dailies, and enclosed in cheap envelopes, varying in size and shape, posted from widely differing parts of the country. I may add here that no one concerned with the case appeared to have had the opportunity to post them, unless of course it was done for the sender by d i f f e r e n t persons. At any rate, the letters were untraceable. They were all abusive and threatening a n d evidently from the same person; they were all signed 'Her Husband.'

"Mr. Mysterioso made no secret of having received them and there was a good deal of excitement as each new one arrived. The police gave him what protection they could and when in June he came down to Thrushford in Kent to lay a cornerstone, it was our turn—I was a young constable then and didn't know too much about it, but it was rather anxious work for my superiors because he had done a brief

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season at the theater there a couple of years before.

"It was arranged, therefore, to cover certain points round the site of the ceremony. The cornerstone was for a new wing; a second wing, completed on the outside but not on the inside, lay between the cornerstone and the main hospital building."

He drew a plan in the air, a circular movement with the flat palm of the right hand for the main building of the hospital, a stab with the forefinger of the left hand for the cornerstone, and a sharp slash with the edge of the hand for the unfinished wing lying midway between them. "It was from a middle window on the top floor of this wing that the shot was fired."

And he described the unfinished wing. A simple oblong; ground floor and two stories, with its main entrance at one end. This entrance had no door as yet, was only a gap leading into a little hall out of which the stairs curled round the still empty elevator shaft. A sloping roof of slate surrounded by a ledge with a low parapet.

"It was an easy matter to search it. Except on the top floor there were no interior walls and up there only half a row of rooms was completed—each floor was designed to have a central corridor with small rooms leading off both sides. There was a lot of stuff about, planks and tools and shavings and so on, but literally nowhere big enough for a man to hide. It was searched very thoroughly the night before the ceremony and less thoroughly the next morning, and a man was placed at the main entrance with orders not to move away from it."

"And he didn't move away from it," said the young man. "That was my father."

Inspector Block ignored him. "The order of events is as follows: One hour before the ceremony Mr. Mysterioso arrived and the Superintendent explained the arrangements to him. Their way to the main hospital building, where the reception committee awaited him, led past the entrance of the unfinished wing. Just outside it a man was speaking to the policeman on duty."

"The *murderer* was speaking to the policeman on duty," said the young man.

"This person was well known to the police," said the Inspector, ignoring the young man again, "as a press photographer—not yet calling himself Mr. Photoze. He wanted permission to go up on the roof and take pictures of the ceremony from there."

"Always one for the interesting angle," said Mr. Photoze archly.

"The Super was about to refuse him, but Mr. Mysterioso recognized the man and said he

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should be permitted to go up. So he was carefully searched for any weapons and it ended in all of them going up to the top floor together. Mr. Mysterioso, of course, had his man, Tom, help him."

"We'd been together so long," said Mysterioso, "that really in the end we moved like a single person, always running a sort of three-legged race. I had no pain from this thing, it was only a total lack of strength. A couple of flights of stairs was nothing to us."

You couldn't get on with it, with these people, thought the Inspector. They all wanted to exhibit. "At any rate, they went up," he proceeded, letting a little of his irritability show. "There was a trap door, the only exit to the roof, and Mr. Photoze, as we now call him, was helped up through it with his gear. At that moment Tom came down the corridor, having left his master standing propped up against the window sill in one of the little rooms, looking down with interest at the site. Tom said he didn't like it, that he felt uneasy about the whole thing; the man shouldn't have been allowed up. Someone—I think in fact it was P.C. Robbins, the man on the door, this young man's father—suggested that there was a bolt which could be shot from the inside, locking the photographer on the roof. So this was done. Mysterioso was waiting for them at the door of the little room and they went on to the cornerstone.

"And then—it happened. The guest of honor went up the four shallow steps that led to the platform in front of the cornerstone. There was a shot and both men fell. A minute later Tom, the servant, died in his master's arms. As he died he was heard to say: "Thank God they only got me. It was meant for you.' "

"He said it over and over," said the woman who had been near the site. "Over and over. It was so dreadful, so touching—"

"Let us hear from our witnesses later," said Mysterioso; but he looked down at his hands, lying in his lap, and when she continued he made no further attempt to stop her.

For the woman was carried away, full of tragic memories and could not be still. "I can see them now! A moment before it had all been so lovely, so sunny and pleasant, all the doctors from the hospital there and lots of guests, and Matron, of course, and some of the nurses, and Mr. Mysterioso looking so magnificent, if I may say so,"—she made a little ducking movement which the great man graciously accepted "—with his top hat and flowing black cloak, as though he'd just walked down from the stage to come and

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lay our cornerstone for us.

"And then—they went up the steps together, he on the left. His man walked very close to him, and I suppose that under the cloak his arm was holding tight to his man's arm; but you wouldn't have guessed that he was lame at all. They stood there in the sunshine and a few words were spoken and so on; and then the man put out his hand to take the trowel, which was on a stand to his right, and pass it across to his master—and suddenly there was this sharp *crack!*—and before we knew what was happening, the man fell and dragged his master down with him." And the lifting up of the splendid head with its tawny, gray-streaked hair, the great roar of defiance flung up at the window from which the shot had come.

"When you think," said the woman, "what a target he presented! We had all swung round to where the shot came from and we could see a man up on the roof. Of course we all thought he was the murderer. And at any moment he might have taken a second shot and really killed the right man this time."

"If he was in fact the right man," said Inspector Block, throwing a cold pebble into this warm sea of emotion. "Not all of us were convinced at the time that the shot wasn't meant for Tom."

"For God's sake!" said Mysterioso. "Who would want to kill Tom?—my poor, inoffensive, faithful, loving old Tom. And what about the threatening letters? Besides, he said it himself—over and over, as the lady says. He'd have known if he'd had such an enemy, but he said it himself, 'It was meant for you.'" He appealed to the woman. "You heard him?"

"Yes, of course. You called me close. 'Listen!' you said." She shuddered. "The blood was coming up, bubbling up out of his mouth. They were the last words he spoke. 'Thank God they only got me. It was meant for you.'"

"And so he died—for my sins," said the Grand Mysterioso, and again he was silent. But he's not sorry really, thought the young man, crouched in his sofa corner, watching the big handsome old face heavy with sadness, and yet spread over with a sort of unction of self-satisfaction. "He's pleased, underneath it all, that everyone should know that even at that age he could still be seducing girls, breaking up homes, getting threatening letters from husbands." And certainly in the ensuing years the aging lion had done nothing to obliterate the public's memory of that terrible, yet magnificent day. "I was so bloody mad, I forgot all about everything but Tom. Dying for *my* sins!" In a hundred talks and broadcasts he

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lived it over again, mock regretful, mock remorseful (thought the young man) that a man should have died to pay for the triumphs of his own all-conquering virility. "*I* think you're pleased," the young man said. "I think you're proud of it. If you weren't, you wouldn't have kept telling people about it all this time."

"He's got you there, old boy," said the actress, Marguerite Devine, without venom. "Literally below the belt," she added, laughing, and then said, "Oh, I'm sorry, love!" and laughed no more.

"I know a lot about people," said the young man, and it was true; the insecurities of his childhood had heightened his perception—solitary, antisocial, he paid no lip service to conventional pretenses, was undeceived by them. Life had accustomed him to be ready for the worst.

"Well, the cheeky monkey!" said the old man in a comic accent, trying to make light of it. Inspector Block asked patiently if they might now get on with it. "What happened next—"

"I'll tell what happened next," said the young man. "Because I know it." You could see the tense clutch of his hands, the tense pressure of his shabby shoes on the soft carpeting of Mysterioso's room; his very skin color had changed, strangely darkened with hollows ringed round the bright eyes. He was coming now to the defense of his father. "My father was standing in the doorway where he'd been posted. I've heard him tell about it a hundred times; he was always telling it. He heard the shot fired and ran to the corner of the building and sent one glance at the site and saw what had happened—and don't tell me that in that short time someone could have come out of the building and run away, because they couldn't. Could they?" he appealed to Inspector Block.

"No," said Block. "In that short time anyone shooting from the window where the gun was could hardly even have reached the top of the stairs. Experiments were made."

"Well, all right, so he saw them both fall and he saw the crowd swing round and stare up at the building, so he knew where the shot must have come from and he turned back and ran into the building and up the stairs. He didn't bother about the ground floor because he knew the man couldn't have got there yet; and anyway, it was just an open space, he could see that it was empty; and so was the second floor an empty space."

"That's right," said Block. "He acted perfectly wisely. Go on, you're doing fine."

The tense darkened face gave him no thanks. "He went tearing up," said the young man, "and

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as he passed the first big window on the stairs looking across at the main building of the hospital he saw people lying in beds and sitting in wheel chairs out on the balcony—".

They had sat very quiet and intent, those two who had been on the hospital balcony that day long ago—traced and brought here by the dramatic enthusiasm of the Grand Mysterioso to stand witness to what they had seen. "Yes, I remember it well," said the woman. "They'd wheeled us out there into the sunshine—we were pretty sick people, from the surgical wards. Nothing to see, mind: the unfinished wing cut off the view of the park beyond and of course of the cornerstone. It would have been fun to lie there and watch the ceremony, but—well, we couldn't see it. Still, it was nice to get a bit of fresh air. This gentleman was on the other side of the partition with others from Men's Surgical. We were lying there quietly, dozing, enjoying the sunshine—"

"That's right. And then suddenly we heard the shot and half a minute later this policeman comes racing up the stairs of the unfinished wing opposite. There was a lot of glass there, at least there was going to be—now it was just a huge great open space. He went dashing past and then something must have occurred to him, because he reappeared, hanging out of the window to shout out to us, clinging to the post with one hand. 'Watch the stairs!' he shouted. 'Watch that no one comes down!' We were all excited, we yelled back, 'What's happened?' and he yelled, 'They've shot him!' or 'They've got him!'—I don't know which—and then off he went tearing up the stairs again."

"What a kerfuffle!" said the woman. "Everyone squealing and hysterical, one of them fainted—we were all weak, I suppose, and I think we thought the murderer would suddenly appear and start taking shots at us from the window—"

"Or from the roof," said the young man.

"We're coming to the roof in a moment," said Mysterioso patiently. Don't worry about him, his look said to the rest of them; after all, this is why we're here. "Now—your father went tearing on up the stairs—?"

"Yes, and came to the top and ran along the corridor. There were a few rooms with their walls up, but the rest was open space—no ceiling in yet, you could see the joists and the tiles up over your head. He ran past several of the little rooms that *were* partitioned—there were no doors or windows in yet—and suddenly in one of them he saw the rifle. A .22, rigged up, fixed, aligned on the cornerstone below.

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"He took just one glance and ran out into the corridor again, to try and find someone. He knew the murderer must still be up there. But there was nobody. And then he heard footsteps coming pounding up the stairs and it was—well, now he's Inspector Block." Even that seemed to be an injury; his father had never had the chance to become Inspector Robbins.

"He met me at the top of the stairs," said Block. "I'd been on duty at the other end of the wing. He said, 'My God, there's nobody here! They've shot him, but there's nobody here!' He looked almost—scared, as though he'd seen a ghost. 'There's a rifle fixed up,' he said. 'Come and look!'"

In the last of the half-dozen little rooms that had so far received their dividing walls there was a rough tripod formed of three planks. These had been shaped at their ends so that, propped against the skirting boards on three sides of the room, they met and dovetailed to form a crotch into which the butt of the rifle fitted securely. A short length of rope had been tied round the whole and this was further reinforced by a twelve-foot length of twine, doubled for extra strength, its ends roughly tucked in as though hurriedly done. Into the wood of the window sill two nails had been driven to form a triangle through which the muzzle of the rifle had been thrust. The whole was trained, steady as a rock, on the site below.

And spilled out of a torn paper bag, too small to hold so many, three out of half a dozen rosy apples had rolled out on the dusty boards of the wooden floor.

"We stood and stared and as we stood, there was a scraping and scuffling overhead, a small shower of debris, and when we looked up we saw two hands tearing at the slates above us and a face peering through. And a voice said, 'For God's sake, what's happening? They've shot him!' And then added, 'But, my God, what a picture!'"

The picture that had brought Mr. Photoze fame and fortune: the picture of the famous lion head raised, mouth half open in that great outraged bellow heedless of danger: "You murderers, you've got the wrong man!"

Usually, for publication, the head was lifted out of the rest, but the whole picture showed the scene moments after the impact of the bullet. First the edge of the parapet, then an expanse of grass between the main building and the cornerstone; the smoother grass where turf had been laid for the ceremony, the flowering shrubs temporarily planted for the occasion, the tubs of geraniums; the partially built wall with the cornerstone at its center, the small

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crowd swung about to stare up, stupefied with shock.

But as the press photographer had exclaimed, in instant recognition of what he had achieved—what a picture! A murdered man, caught in the very act of dying; the hands that held him as famous a pair as existed in the world, and the splendid head, the magnificent, ravaged, upturned face. But the most beautiful thing in the whole photograph, Mr. Photoze assured them now, had been the glimpse in the foreground of the parapet's edge. "Because if the parapet is in the picture, then I took that picture from the roof and not from the room below where the rifle was."

"Anyone can fake a photograph," said the young man.

"The police confiscated my equipment," said Mr. Photoze, "before I had time to do any faking. And before you get any sharper and cut yourself, dear boy, there was no apparatus by which the camera could be left to take pictures all by itself. I wasn't lugging more than I had to up to that roof."

It was a splendid room—big and luxurious, all just a bit larger than life, like Mr. Mysterioso himself. But the young man sat tensed like a wild thing about to spring, and his tension communicated itself to the rest of them, meeting his sick and angry stare with eyes divided between understanding, pity, and impatience. He resumed his parrot cry. "You were there. And nobody else was. My father didn't do it, so it must have been you."

Mr. Photoze was—understandably enough—one of the impatient ones. "Now, look here!" He appealed to them all. "I was up on that damn roof. I was there the whole time, anyone could have seen me there—"

"No one was looking," said the young man. "They were all watching the ceremony."

"And so was I, you silly fool! I was taking photographs, that's what I was there for. And then suddenly this gun goes off somewhere below me and I saw the two men fall. It was like a film shot in slow motion," he recalled, "the two of them collapsing, but slowly, slowly. I stood there frozen and then I saw that Mysterioso had lifted up his head and was shouting up to the window where the gun was; and I seemed to come to life and started clicking away like mad—"

"Without a thought that a man was dying?"

"Sort of reflex action, I suppose," said Mr. Photoze. He added simply, "It's my job."

Mr. Mysterioso had had much cause to be grateful to the photographer who had forgotten all but getting on with his job. The photograph had kept alive

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he legend of that moment of ɔravado, of selfless courage on ɔehalf of one who had after all ɔeen only a servant. They had emained on friendly terms ever ɔince; it was to him that Mr. Photoze had turned for advice when the young man's foolish threats had suddenly turned into action. "You did quite right," Mysterioso said. "The show must go on."

"And so must this meeting," said Inspector Block, tapping an impatient toe.

"I'm sorry. Yes—well, I went on taking pictures till the crowd surged in and there was nothing to take but the backs of their heads. So then I suddenly thought about the shooting and I peeked over the parapet and there to my horror I saw the tip of a gun, the barrel, just showing beyond the window sill. To this day I don't know why I did it, but I dropped all my gear and ran along the ledge to the trap door, to get down and—I don't know, *do* something, I suppose. Sheer madness, because imagine if the murderer had still been there! But anyway, I couldn't get the trap door open. I tugged and I kicked but—well, we know now that it had been bolted from the inside. So I ran back to where I'd seen the gun and what was in my mind then, I think, was that there it still was, still pointing down at all those helpless people—"

"He'd have cleared out long before," said the young man scornfully, "while you were taking pictures and running up and down."

"Well—" He spread artistic, explanatory, jingly hands. "I mean, one isn't exactly a man of action, *is* one? I daresay what I thought didn't make much sense. But I did imagine him crouching there with that gun in his hands—of course I didn't know then about the tripod and all that—and all those poor dear people in danger down below. And suddenly I started smashing at the slates, bashing at them with the heel of my shoe, clearing a little hole so that at least I could look down and see what he was doing—perhaps frighten him off, make him clear out."

But he had cleared out long ago—cleared out, vanished into thin air. Nobody was there except two policemen, staring back, astonished, into Mr. Photoze's startled face. "One said, 'What are you doing up there?'

"'He had permission. To take photos. I know him,' said P.C. Robbins. 'He's all right.'"

"My poor father—little did he think!" said the young man.

Mr. Photoze collapsed into his chair with an air of giving up. "*I* don't know. What can you do? The *facts*, you silly boy, I've just given you the *facts!* I was up on the roof, I couldn't get

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down—it was your own father who pulled the bolt and locked me out. How could I have committed the murder, how could I have fired the gun? Even if I'd *wanted* to, how could I have done it? We've all just given you the facts."

The trapped animal, head turning from side to side, seeking a way out. And then—the release. The young man was absolutely still, struck mindless for a moment by the immensity of the idea. He blurted out at last, "The apples!"

"The apples?"

"Who ties a bag of apples at the neck with string? And—yes, there was other string in that room, wound round the tripod and the butt of the rifle, a long piece of string. What for? The rifle was already tied into place with the rope." He said to Inspector Block, "Was there a nail in the wall opposite the window?"

"There were nail holes," said Block. "They were everywhere."

"The rifle fixed steady, tied by the rope, aligned on the spot." The dark was receding from his face, he was alive with excitement. "And tied to the rifle—to the trigger of the rifle—the string; tied with a slip noose, easy to undo afterwards, and the other end of the string tied with a slip noose to a nail in the wall opposite the window. And a bag of apples—an innocent-looking bag of apples that no one will worry about too much. A little light refreshment for the murderer while he waits?" he suggested to Inspector Block with a fine contempt.

"I was a plain copper in those days," said Block, "and not in the close confidence of my superiors. But I don't think they took it all quite so easily as that. On the other hand, murderers are funny animals, they have all sorts of cockeyed reasons for what they do. He could, for example, have been a smoker and didn't want to draw attention to the fact—leaving ashes and stubs around. So he supplied himself with something to munch, to fill the gap."

"Are *you* a smoker?" said the young man nastily to Mr. Photoze.

"I have no idea what either of you is talking about," said Mr. Photoze.

"A bag of apples is a funny thing," said the young man. "Sort of—nobbly. Of course other things would have done as well, but the presence of a bag of apples on the scene could be explained in lots of ways—for example, something to stop the murderer from wanting to smoke." His face, growing white and pinched now where the dark had been, stared, ugly with spite, at Mr. Photoze. "I was sure you must have done it," he said, "because I knew my father hadn't. But now I *know*. Because I know

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how." And his hands described it, stretched apart, holding taut an imaginary string. "One end tied to the triggger, one end fixed to the wall. At the right moment something heavy falling on the string, jerking it down, yanking back the trigger, firing the shot."

Absolute silence had fallen in the big room. Mr. Photoze said at last, shakily, "I was on the roof. How could I have dropped the bag of apples down?"

"You admit you made a hole in the slates," said the young man. "You dropped it down through that."

Silence again. Inspector Block said quietly, "Very ingenious. But your father was in the room within two minutes or less after the shot was fired. The string was wound round the tripod when he first saw it. Who took it down and wound it there?"

"Perhaps his precious father did," said Mr. Photoze, a trifle viciously, "having fixed it all up himself. He was supposed to be on duty at the entrance. But no one could see him. Who knows that he was really there?"

"He was seen going up the stairs after the shot was fired," said Mr. Mysterioso reasonably.

"That's right. To take down string before Block arrived and saw it."

The young man was unafraid. "How could he have got it to work? He was outside the door, three stories down—we know that because he was seen coming up. So . . . Mr. Mysterioso, you're the magician here. How could my father have got the trick to work?"

"There are ways," admitted Mr. Mysterioso reluctantly. "Blocks of ice and melting wax and timing machines—after all, he only had to be the first one on the scene to clear the evidence away."

"Curiously enough," said Block, "the police thought of some of these little ideas too. Considering the length of the string—just the width of the room—and the uselessness of it where we found it, as the young man rightly points out, just wound round the tripod, not even knotted—well, we did just think about it. Though I admit that I don't think anyone read this particular significance into the bag of apples. But I do assure you that the place was searched for candle grease and damp patches and timing clocks, till we thought we never wanted to see an unfinished building again. And Robbins, of course, was examined from head to toe, inside and out till he couldn't have had so much as a spent match concealed about him. You can take it from me—inside and outside, both the building and P.C. Robbins—absolutely nothing."

"So where does that leave me?" said Mr. Photoze, and immediately answered himself. "On the

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roof, dropping a bag of apples through a hole which wasn't there until *after* the shot was fired; when two policemen, including your own dear parent, stood there and watched me make it."

"For the second time," said the young man.

Up there on the roof—out of sight, if anybody had been looking that way which, in the nature of things they wouldn't be—a photographer fiddling about with the tools of his trade. A slate removed, two slates or three or four—enough to allow him to slip down into the room below, fix up the tripod and the rifle and the taut string, all prepared and left ready previously. Back again, using the tripod as a step to hoist yourself up through the hole and back onto the roof; the bag of apples in his hand. And the shot fired by dropping the bag of apples to pull sharply on the string—then down through the hole again, quickly twist the string round the tripod, and back on the roof, covering the hole over with the slates before P.C. Robbins even gets up the stairs. Covering the hole over roughly—anyone entering the little room will be intent on the rifle and the tripod, not looking up. And before they get around to the roof—start battering and scrabbling, smashing the slates, making the hole again—

"Dear God!" said Mr. Photoze, and caught Inspector Block's eye and said again, "Dear *God!*"

The young man sat bolt upright in his chair, triumphant. "Just tell me," said Mr. Photoze at last, slowly, "why should I have rigged up all this nonsense? I could just have jumped down through the hole, fired the rifle, and nipped back."

"Using what as a hoist?" said the young man. "It's a long way up to the roof, even to the lower bit of the slope where the hole was."

"Oh, well, as to that, with so much ingenuity as you ascribe to me I think I could have managed something, don't you?"

The young man ignored the slightly teasing tone. "There was something much more important—the photograph. You had to be there to take the photograph, the one with the parapet in it that proves you were on the roof when the gun went off."

"So I did!" said Mr. Photoze; and it frightened the young man a little—how could the man be so easy and unafraid?—with his mocking, half-indulgent admiration, a touch in his voice of something very much like pity. "You knew Mysterioso," he burst out. "He recognized you at the main entrance, it was he who told them to let you go up on the roof, I suppose," he added, spitting out venom wherever it might

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hurt,' " that, like all your kind you reveled in having your picture taken, didn't you?"

"I was willing to do him a kindness," said Mysterioso mildly, "that was all."

"Well, it made a change then, if you were," said the young man. "You'd done him anything but a kindness two years before, hadn't you?" And he looked at the rest of them with a triumph almost pitiful because it was so filled with spite. "You want a motive?" he said. "Well, I'll tell it to you—the Inspector could have told it to you long ago, only he protects this man like all the rest have done. All the world knew that Mysterioso had taken Mr. Photoze's girl friend away from him."

"Dear me," said Marguerite Devine, "would you say that this was where *I* come in?"

There fell a verbal silence in which even Mr. Photoze lost his recent poise, jangling his golden bracelets with nervous movements of his hands. Perhaps it was their tinkling that led him to say finally, "Do I really give the impression of a man who would kill another man for taking a woman away from him?"

"Speaking from memory," said Marguerite, "I would say that the answer to that one is—no."

"You'll confirm it, Marguerite?—all I did was to take pictures of you." He explained to the "court." "I lived in the same group of flats. I was a lodger—with this young man's parents, us in the basement, her ladyship here in considerably more comfort on the fifth floor. She was a star then, at the top of her career—"

"Not to say a little over the hill," admitted Marguerite ruefully.

"Do you think she'd have looked at me in that way?—a scruffy litttle press photographer without tuppence to bless himself with. But she was an actress, she was at liberty at the time, and all actresses, all that our young gentleman here would call 'their kind,' like having their pictures taken. It's part of their stock in trade. So . . . It was good practise for me; and in those days what a marvelous profile—".

"For 'in those days,' dear," said Marguerite, "much thanks." But she added, kindly, to the young man, "However, at least an honest face, love, I hope. And in all honesty I tell you—he wouldn't have killed so much as a fly on account of *me*."

"Well, some other reason then, what does it matter? But he was up on that roof, he could have done it and nobody else could, so he must have."

Inspector Block got suddenly to his feet. "Now, look here, my lad! You've had a long innings, you've done a lot of very clever

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talking—now you listen for a change! Your theory is beautifully ingenious but it has one tiny flaw and that is, it won't work. The whole thing depends on a hole in the roof so big that Mr. Photoze could get down through it and then up again. But the police do think of these things too, you know; and that hole was most carefully examined and the simple fact is that he couldn't have got his *head* through it, let alone the rest of him. The slates were securely pegged down and couldn't be removed; the only hole was the small one he made by shattering one of the slates with the heel of his shoe."

The young man was taken aback. It had seemed to fit so well, justify all his suspicions. And now nothing was left of it. Back to the parrot cry that had sustained him all this bitter time since his father had died. "He was on the roof. There was only him and my father—"

"That's right," said Inspector Block. "Him—and your father."

You couldn't call him slow on the uptake. The young man was there before any of them and had sprung to his feet—frightened now, really frightened. "You mean—together? In it together?"

The rifle hidden away during the night—it was true that these things, the gun, the bag of apples, the string, might very easily have escaped detection during the more cursory inspection on the day of the ceremony: small enough objects to be lost among the innumerable bits and pieces lying about in a building still under construction. Up to the roof with Mr. Photoze, then, searched and found free of the impedimenta of murder; he'd have been smuggled up there without permission if none had been given, of course; had they been surprised, those two, in the middle of their plan, when Mysterioso and the Superintendent had come upon them outside the main entrance? Up to the roof, anyway—and the bolt shot that would keep him up there. "It was P.C. Robbins who suggested that the inside bolt be shot. It left his accomplice, now that he was known to be on the roof, safe from accusation of firing the gun."

The young man did not argue. There was in his heart now a terrible fear.

Everyone gone off at last to prepare for the ceremony—a clear field. P.C. Robbins leaves his post at the main entrance and nips up the stairs—no patients yet, perhaps, to mark his going, or if there are, after all the passings up and down that morning, who is going to recall one more policeman checking things once again?

Up to the murder room then; a minute and a half to erect the prepared tripod, not more ("We

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experimented with that'")—to fix the taut string and ("Here it comes!") to pass up the bag of apples through the small hole which meantime Mr. Photoze would have been making by the removal of one slate. And P.C. Robbins is back at his post long before the ceremonial procession is due to pass down again to the site—and *he* can't have fired the shot because he was at the post when it was fired—any more than Mr. Photoze could have fired it, known to be locked up (and taking pictures) on the roof.

The bag of apples is dropped and the taut string pulls on the trigger and the shot is fired; and the one slate is replaced, to be reopened with much scrabbling and shattering when the proper moment arrives; and the photograph is taken. And three steps at a time P.C. Robbins comes pounding up the stairs to untie the string and wind it—no time for knots—round the butt of the gun, to look as though it had some purpose other than its real one; and is ready to greet P.C. Block arriving, panting. "There's a rifle fixed up. Come and look!"

The young man stared, helpless. Great tears rolled down his thin face, white now and haggard. "I don't believe it. I don't believe it." But to fight was better than to despair. "Anyway, what was the reason? My father had no reason to do it, so why should he?"

Inspector Block said steadily, "Mr. Photoze lived in the same group of flats as this lady did. You were ready enough to accuse him of an affair with her. But your father also lived in that same group of flats; and the lady is a very pretty lady. And then—"

"Oh, come now, darling!" protested Marguerite. "First a photographer—now a policeman as well. Have a heart! I wasn't very fussy—*but!*"

"— along came Mr. Mysterioso," went on Block, "and took her away from them both."

"What a happy little threesome we seem to have been," said Mr. Photoze.

"I don't say you were a threesome—not in that sense. There may be many ways of caring for a woman, needing a woman—many reasons, at any rate, for resenting her being stolen from you."

"But I *wasn't* stolen from the policeman," said Marguerite, half laughing. And she looked at the young man's face and laughed no more. "Now, look, Inspector, this is absolutely not fair. I've told you about Mr. Photoze—we were both frank enough with you. So believe me when I say, when I swear to you on oath, that as for the policeman I never set eyes on the fellow in my life. Not till after the shooting; then we

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all saw one another in connection with the case. But that was all."

"So there!" said the young man passionately. He added with a suddenly rather sweet simplicity, "Besides he was married to my mother."

"And loved your mother?"

"Yes," said the young man (loved her too much, to the exclusion of oneself—quarreled with her, yes, but that was because of the failure and the poverty brooding in the home, which in turn was because of the crime and subsequent unjust dismissal).

Inspector Block did not like what he had to say next. But he said it. "All right. He loved her. But Mr. Photoze lived with them, and perhaps in his own way he was devoted to her too—enough at any rate to enter into a plot to avenge her. Because—" It was not very nice, but it had to be said. "Because Mr. Mysterioso had been visiting those flats, hadn't he? And one lady at a time wasn't necessarily enough for the Grand Mysterioso."

"You flatter me," said Mysterioso; but nobody listened to him. For it was terrible—horrrible—to see the young man. Before, it had been a young face, dark, pale as the emotions passed across it. Now it was a man's face, a clown's face, a mask of white patched clownishly with pink. That gesture again as though physical danger were coming close to him. He whimpered, "Oh, no! Oh, no!"

"We have to consider everything," said Inspector Block, as though excusing what he did.

"It's madness," said Mysterioso. He hauled himself straighter in his chair but he too had gone pale. "By all I hold sacred, I never even saw her—not till after the inquiries started." He looked with pity at the cowering young man. "I never touched your mother, boy, never so much as saw her."

"You could have," said the young man, sobbing. "You could have." His body was bowed over till his forehead rested on his two fists clenched on the arm of the chair. "Everyone tells lies—you have to say you didn't know her. But you could have, you may have—"

Marguerite got up from her place. She went and knelt beside him, lifted his head, pushing back the damp, soft, spiky young-boy hair from his forehead; caught at the writhing hands and held them steady in her own two hands, so white and well-cared for with their long, pink, manicured nails. "Hush, love, hush! Of course it isn't true." And she looked across the room at Mr. Mysterioso and said, "A secret—between us and these kind people here who'll be too generous, I know, ever to give us away." She glanced at the door.

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"Nobody could be listening?"

"No," said the Inspector.

"Between these four walls then?" She looked round at them, appealing, then back to Mysterioso. She said, "I think we *must* tell."

An actress, "over the hill," glad of the attentions of even a scruffy young press photographer using her as a sitter to practise his craft. Thankful beyond words for the advent of a new admirer and a rich, famous, and handsome one at that, "good to be seen about with" at the fashionable restaurants where theatrical agents and managers would be reminded of her. Entertaining him at home, not at all secretly; dropping naughty hints to anyone who would listen—my darling, he's fan*tastic*! Using it all to further her own ends, to bolster her tottering career.

And a man, larger than life size, not quite like other men. Big, handsome, with his mane of tawny hair, a man who looked like a lion and must live like a lion; a man with a reputation for affairs, in middle age still strutting in the pride of his well publicized virility. And all in an hour, in a moment . . . The accident that had left him a crippled thing, humiliatingly powerless, had left him powerless in other ways as well. "She was—kind," he said, looking at Marguerite still kneeling by the young man's chair. "She kept my secret a secret." To the young man he said, "Even if I'd ever set eyes on her, my boy, your pretty young mother would have been safe from me."

"It's true," said Marguerite. She looked down at her hands. "I know."

Inspector Block helped her up from the floor and back to her chair. He said to them both, with something like humility in his cold voice, "Thank you."

The Grand Mysterioso stirred and sighed and came back to the present with a jerk. "Well, now . . . My dear boy, I think you have no cause to complain. We've done what we came here to do—talked it all out, put it all before you, all the facts, the ifs and the ands, the probabilities and the just possibles—riddled out our very souls for you, so that you may save your own. So save it! Accept the judgment of this court—who also have heard it all—and get rid of this bug that has been obsessing your mind and spoiling your splendid young life. I'll help you. I'll be your friend—you can start all over again, grow up, be a man."

"So now—you two have been the accused, you and Mr. Photoze here. Go outside this room and wait; and we will arrive at a verdict in here, all of us, me and Inspector Block and this kind and lovely lady, Miss Devine, and these three kind people who have

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come here as witnesses, at no small trouble to themselves, to help you too. None of us with any ax to grind, remember that. So—whatever verdict we come to, will you accept it?" And he said kindly, "All we want, boy, in all honesty, is to arrive at the truth and set your mind to rest."

"Suppose," said the young man, "the truth doesn't set my mind at rest."

"Then we'll tell it just the same," said Block. He made a small-boy gesture, licking his thumb and crossing his heart with it. "I swear you shall hear the truth. I'll tell you no lie."

"Considering that I'm in the dock too," said Mr. Photoze, getting up and going toward the door with his accompanying jingle, "and I'm ready to accept the verdict, I think you can too." He opened the door. "Come along, the jury is about to retire."

The door closed behind them. Mr. Mysterioso said, "Photoze will keep him safely out of earshot." But he looked anxious. "Can you really swear to tell him the truth of it? For that matter—what is the truth of it?"

Inspector Block went and stood in the middle of the room. He said, "The truth of it is very short, and very simple. I can tell it to you in—" he counted on his fingers—"in fourteen words. In fact, I could reduce those words to six, and give you the whole story. Of course I could say a lot of other words, but I'm not going to. It's not for me to accuse. Our business is to exonerate." And he spoke the fourteen words. "I think the rest is self-explanatory . . . Verdict unanimous? Let's have the young man back."

The big lush room, curtains drawn, hushed in the evening quiet, no traffic rumbling outside, scented with flowers and the upward curl of cigar and cigarette smoke, bottles and glasses hospitably placed within reach of outstretched hands . . . The door opened and Mr. Photoze came jangling through and the young man was standing there, wearing the dark look again, his eyes like the eyes of a frightened animal, his hands tensed into claws. Mr. Mysterioso struggled his helpless limbs forward in his chair and held out a hand. "Come over here, son. Come and stand by me."

He came over and stood by the chair. "It's all right," said Mysterioso and took the narrow brown hand and held it, strongly and comfortingly in his own. He said, "You see, it hasn't taken long. We all recognized the truth immediately. Verdict unanimous." And he gave it. "Mr Photoze—not guilty; neither motive nor opportunity. And your father—not guilty; neither motive nor opportunity. My hand on my heart!"

A sort of shudder ran through

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the young man. Tears ran down his face as he stood motionless, his head bowed. "All go!" said Mysterioso. "I'll look after him. We've done our job. But never again," he said, giving a little shake to the nerveless hand still held in his own, "any threats to Mr. Photoze, let alone any violence! You acccept the verdict? That's a promise?"

The bowed head nodded.

"Good boy! Well, then, good night to you all," said the old man, "and thank you." And he said again to the young man. "I'm sure you thank them too?"

Yes, nodded the hanging head again; thin hand still clasped in the veined old hand, the beautiful, still mobile, veined old hand of the master magician, the Grand Mysterioso.

Mr. Photoze walked away with Inspector Block. "Well, thank God that's over! I think I'm pretty safe from now on. He gave his promise and he'll keep it, I'm sure."

"Oh, yes, you'll have no more trouble," said Block. "He meant it. I know these kids; they only need convincing." He walked a little farther in silence. "What you and I now know," he said carefully, "at least I think you know it?— had better be kept secret."

"Mysterioso and the others know it."

"Some of it," said the Inspector. A vain man, Mysterioso, he added, really one of the vainest he had ever known. "Of course, as you said, it's their stock-in-trade."

"For what he admitted tonight," suggested Mr. Photoze, "I think much may be forgiven the old man."

"Nevertheless, through his vanity he's obstructed the course of justice. From the very beginning—from *before* the very beginning."

"You mean—the letters?"

"The letters—anonymous letters signed 'Her Husband.' In all sorts of different envelopes, in all sorts of different type, posted from all sorts of different parts of the country—"

"Ye Gods! And who traveled all over the country constantly, with his act? And who got all that lovely publicity? You mean he wrote them to himself?"

"No, I think the letters were genuine," said Block slowly. "Genuine letters in genuine envelopes. I just think the letters didn't belong in the envelopes."

Typed envelopes—envelopes that had previously held circulars, impossible to distinguish, even by the senders, from the myriad of similar envelopes pushed day after day through letter boxes up and down the land. "He'd just pick one with a Birmingham postmark or a Glasgow postmark or what

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you will—put the letter in that, seal it up instead of merely tucking it in—the glue would be still intact; tear it open again and then send it off to the police—first taking care to arrange for the maximum publicity."

"The publicity I understand," said Mr. Photoze. "But for the rest—I daresay I'm dense, but why put the letters into new envelopes? Why not just show them as they were?" And he answered himself immediately, "Well, but good God, yes—of course! *Because the letters were addressed to someone else.*"

Fourteen words: The young man's father couldn't have killed Tom. Tom *was* the young man's father.

While the cat's away, the mouse will play. And why shouldn't the mouse play? How had the indispensable servant spent the long waiting hours, while his master dallied five stories above?

"So the letters were really addressed to Tom—Tom Cat perhaps we should call him from now on. And the shot—but good heavens, that performance at the foot of the cornerstone?"

"A performance," said Inspector Block briefly.

"With a dying man in his arms—his friend?"

"I wonder if the poor neutered cat felt so very warmly towards the full Tom after all? And think of the dividends! The photograph—but that was a bonus—of the great, defiant gesture; the reputation ever afterwards for heedless courage. Some defiance!—he knew perfectly well there wouldn't be another shot. The murderer hadn't got the wrong man at all. It was meant for Tom."

"But Tom himself said—"

"Just recall the way that went," said Inspector Block. "The man was bleeding at the mouth, hardly in good shape for clear articulation. Mysterioso listened, then he called the woman to come close. He *told* her what the man was saying: 'Thank God they only got me—it was meant for you.' He told them all. The woman listened to the choked-out words and believed what she'd been told. No doubt Tom gasped out something like, 'My God, they've got me. He really meant it'—something like that. Don't you see, the magician forced the card on her; she heard what he told her to hear, that's all."

"Some opportunist!"

"He'd shown that in the matter of the letters. This was only an extension of that."

"He'd bring the first letter to his master—I daresay there weren't many secrets between those two. I wonder," said Inspector Block, "what Mysterioso's first reaction would have been?"

"Jealousy," said Mr. Photoze.

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"I think so too, especially after what we heard tonight. I think Mr. Mysterioso wanted those letters for himself. So—all sorts of good reasons to the man: you're in danger; this idiot, whoever he is, might try something funny. The police won't bother too much about you, but if *I* were to ask for protection—And Tom, after long years in 'the business,' would be the first to appreciate the value of the publicity, the anxious fans, the e a g e r sensation-seekers, flocking to performances with the subconscious hope that something tragic would happen—as they flock to the circus."

"Why no letters before that?"

"I think," said Block slowly, "that all the way along this was a crime arising out of opportunity. And here was the first opportunity. The months passed, the baby was born, Robbins fumed and was sick with anger; he couldn't just go and beat up the seducer—he was in the police and the police wouldn't stand for that sort of thing; and more important, he wasn't going to let the world know of his s h a m e. But then—well, Mysterioso told us that these invitations to lay cornerstones and whatnot were arranged months in advance; and the first people to know about forthcoming events are the local police. Suddenly P.C. Robbins learned that his enemy was coming to Thrushford.

"Threats at first, meaningless probably, just to give the seducer a bad time, with the vague hope that when he comes to Thrushford with his master, one may be able to add some small frightening shock just to shake him up. But the seducer turns it all to his own advantage, makes a sort of public joke of it, hands the letters to another man. The rankling anger grows and grows and begins to take on a more positive quality. And then the second opportunity presents itself.

"I don't know which came first—the rifle or the post of duty outside the unfinished w i n g. Either could have been fiddled, I daresay, having achieved the other. Not too difficult, for example, for a policeman to come by a weapon. Some old lady finds the rifle after her husband's death, hardly dares to touch the nasty dangerous thing, knows nothing certainly of numbers and identification marks, hands it over to the first copper, and thinks no more about it. He may have had it stashed away for years, or from the time his suspicions were first aroused; by the time it came to be used, the hander-over could be dead or senile or have moved elsewhere—certainly it was never traced. At any rate, with it in his possession and a perfect place at his disposal for using it, he began really to think about taking action. He thought out a plan,

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worked on it, and brought it off. And damn near perfect it turned out to be."

"No one guessed at the time how the thing was done?"

"My higher-ups may have; but it was all so tenuous. Still, he'd lived in the flats where Mysterioso had visited; they must have had some suspicions—"

"Only, I had lived there too."

"That's right. And been on the scene of the crime too. So how to choose between the two of you when it seemed impossible for either of you to have done it? At any rate, they cooked up some excuse and got rid of him—I remember him as a difficult chap, brooding and touchy—well, no wonder. I daresay they weren't sorry to let him go. It wasn't till tonight—" He laughed. "It hit you at the same moment."

"But you went on with the theory about possible collusion—"

"I had to run through all the possibilities. I had to leave no doubts in anyone's mind. I didn't want people coming to the young man afterwards, saying, 'He never covered this or that aspect.' But by then I knew. When the young man accused you of making the hole in the roof *before,* I saw you apparently making it—"

"So simple," said Mr. Photoze. "Wasn't it?"

So simple.

P.C. Robbins with hate in his heart and a long perfected plan of revenge. After the major search of the previous day he concealed the rifle, the rope, the string, the apples, and prepared the boards for dovetailing into a tripod. Slipping up when the final inspection had been concluded and they'd all gone off to prepare for the ceremony, he erected the tripod, fixed the rifle, wound a length of twine around the butt to suggest exactly what in fact had been deduced—that some string trick had been played. (A bag of apples dropped onto a taut string, jerking back a trigger—the nonsense of it! As if anyone for a moment could really depend on anything so absurdly susceptible to failure!) Down again, unseen because there was as yet nobody on the hospital balcony, or if observed, just another copper going about his business; the police had been up and down all day.

And then—

The sound of a shot—in the unfinished wing. A policeman tearing up, two steps at a time, pausing only to yell out, "Watch the stairs!" and "They've got him!" Pandemonium, predictably, on the hospital balcony, everyone talking at once, a lot of people ill and easily thrown into hysteria. Noise and talking at any rate, masking the sound of—

"The real shot," said Mr. Photoze.

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"How do you hide a brown paper bag that you've burst to *fake* the sound of a shot? You fill it with too many apples and leave it prominently displayed with two or three of them rolled out from the hole in the side."

"So his father did commit the murder," said Mr. Photoze. "But in fact he didn't. And we could all look the young man in the eye and swear to that."

"These psychiatrists," said Inspector Block. "Oedipal complexes, delusions, paranoia, looking for a scapegoat for his own guilt feelings towards his father—all the rest of it. And 'a long period of treatment'! Hah! One evening's discussion—merely convince the young man that his suspicions are unfounded, and that's all there is to it. From now on he'll be as right as rain."

The young man was as right as rain. He was bending over the Grand Mysterioso, lying back helpless in the big armchair. "If *they* didn't do it, then *you* must have. Of course it wasn't you who was meant to be killed—it was Tom. Because it was you that killed him, wasn't it? You hated him because you were dependent on him, humiliatingly dependent, like a child; I know about that, I know what that's like, to be a child and—and hate someone underneath; and be helpless. And jealous of him—you were jealous of him because he was a man and you weren't any more; you told us about that just now, how ashamed you were. I know about that too, I was only a child but my—my father was a man.

"I was angry with my father about that, but *you*—you were ashamed. And so you killed him. Oh, don't ask *me* how—you're the magician, you're the one who knows the tricks; you said it yourself—things like melting ice and burning-down candles and a lot of others you carefully didn't mention; but you'd know them all right. And there you were with your big cloak, even on such a hot day—all pockets and hiding places.

"And they left you alone when they went down the corridor and hoisted Mr. Photoze up onto the roof and shot the bolt after him; quite a while they must have been there and by the time they came back you were waiting for them out in the corridor—out in the corridor, blocking off their view into that room with your big body and your big cloak. If you could get across the room and out into the corridor, you could do other things—oh, I don't know how and I don't care; you're the magician, you do tricks that nobody ever sees through and this was just another of them. But you did it; if that fool with his bangles and his photos didn't, well then there's no one else.

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"And for what you did my father suffered the rest of his life; it was horrible, we were so poor, they were always fighting and my father wasn't always—wasn't always . . . Well, sometimes he was unkind, a bloody little bastard he'd call me and my mother would cry and cry."

He went on and on, face chalk-white, scarlet-streaked. But he was all right now, as right as rain. He had found his scapegoat. He might love his mother and be loved by her without feeling guilty that his father was dead and could rival him no more. His father had suffered and died and it had been—horrible—to go on resenting his memory; but now he had avenged his father and he was free.

The spittle ran down from his gibbering mouth and fell on the upturned face of the Grand Mysterioso. But Mysterioso made no move to prevent it. The young man's hands were around his throat and the Grand Mysterioso was dead.

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a NEW crime story by

ROBERT L. FISH

Robert L. Fish has many strings to his criminous bow. Readers of EQMM are apt to think of him almost exclusively as the creator of Schlock Homes, as a penning, panning, punning parodist, with a chuckle and sometimes a guffaw in every other paragraph. But Mr. Fish has his serious side—one might even say, his gloomy side. Here is the brightly glimmering Fish in late-Victorian England, but offering us a totally different kind of "period piece"—about murder and conscience, evil and dread . . .

"The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day" and "The paths of glory lead but to"—you know whither . . .

IN A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

by ROBERT L. FISH

IT WAS ON THE RETURN TRIP from the churchyard cemetery that Martin Blackburn felt the first indication of nervousness. As husband of the deceased he rode in the carriage immediately behind the now-empty hearse, and as he sat rigidly on the edge of the seat and stared out of the streaked window at the bleak Northumberland sky, a tremor swept through his body.

He was a tall, gaunt man in his early forties. The taut skin that stretched over the sharp-boned face gave him a skeletal appearance, and the long, thin fingers of his large hands enhanced this imagery. His forehead was high and slightly bulging, and his small ears lay flat against his head, completing the picture of a drawn skull. Only his eyes, sharp and piercing, gave a touch of animation to his face. The black of his costume was quite usual for him, and the occasion had required no change in his normal Sunday attire beyond a funeral band sewn about the

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sleeve of his greatcoat. All the neighbours and the few families working on his farm had always stood in awe of his aloof figure, for by nature he was neither friendly nor communicative. Now, alone in the dim, heaving carriage he braced himself against the hard seat and re-lived the past month . . .

It had actually been surprisingly easy. Loretta's illness had been quite natural in its inception; in fact, it was not until she had been forced to remain in bed for a second week that the possibility of actively arranging her death had even occurred to him. Of course, the idea of her dying and the idea of his subsequently inheriting the large farm and her larger personal income had, on occasion, presented itself to him; for his unattractive and shrewish wife had never relinquished her control over the dowry she had brought to their barren marriage.

But the thought of murder to accomplish these desired ends had only suggested itself since the second week. Then all the details had sprung to mind with such remarkable clarity that he could almost convince himself he was simply an instrument, an agent, directed by forces beyond himself, for Loretta's deserved removal from this vale of life.

He had never been affectionate, either during courting days or after marriage, and he did not make the mistake of changing his ways once his plans were completed. The doctor, for one thing, was far from a fool; nor was Mrs. Crimmins, their housekeeper. He continued to visit his wife's room with the same regularity—as well as the same air of distaste—and to ask the same questions of her, the housekeeper, and the doctor.

His routine for handling the farm was rigorously maintained, and by every carefully calculated action he appeared to be the same man, irritated as he would naturally be by the inconvenience of illness in the house, but expecting that sooner or later his wife would get up from the sick-bed and resume responsibilities.

But behind this facade of normality the details of the murder were being carefully decided upon. Loretta Blackburn had never been too strong; her heart, while not sufficiently weak to cause either herself or her doctor any immediate anxiety, had still required constant medication. Her illness had begun as a simple catarrh and had been aggravated by the damp weather and the poor location of the fireplaces their farmhouse afforded. Her doctor had warned Blackburn of the danger of lung fever and the attendant possibility of a further weakening of her heart; but Blackburn had no intention of depending upon a kindly Fate to resolve his problem.

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A small kettle lit by an alcohol-spirit lamp stood by the patient's bed-side, and each evening Loretta propped herself up complainingly upon the pillows of the great four-poster and inhaled the fumes of a benzoine preparation to clear her head. The murder plan reduced itself to the utmost simplicity: to add to the benzoine solution a small quantity of sulphuric acid and the tiniest of cyanide pellets, and to allow the fumes of this potent concoction to kill his wife.

The mechanics of administration were given particular consideration, for Martin Blackburn had no wish inadvertently to join his wife in death. The odor would, he was sure, be disguised by the sharp aroma of the benzoine itself in a strengthened solution, and a thorough airing of the room would strengthen the appearance of innocent surroundings.

And it had all worked perfectly. He began by taking over the housekeeper's daily task of preparing the benzoine solution. It was done subtly, grudgingly, on the basis that Mrs. Crimmins was using the task as an excuse for shirking her other duties, and the housekeeper was pleased to be relieved of any duty, since the illness of Mrs. Blackburn had thrown the entire burden of the household upon her.

On the evening of the fourth day after Blackburn had assumed the extra sick-room responsibility, he deemed the time ripe, for the crisis had passed and his wife was showing signs of improvement, and the regular visit of the doctor fell on the following day. To the usual preparation he added the acid, and at the last moment slipped in the tiny pellet. Holding his breath tightly, he pressed the cone to his wife's thin and unattractive face. The response to the gas was almost immediate; still holding his breath, he swiftly flung the contents of the flask into the darkness beyond the open window, leaning out into the brisk breeze that swept past.

When his aching lungs could no longer stand the pain of their confinement, he cautiously allowed a breath of night air to filter into his lungs, and then stood inhaling for several minutes. He then softly closed the window, added a scuttle of coals to the fire to remove the unusual chill, returned to the bed-side, and rapidly prepared a harmless solution.

His fear of detection was slight; the odor was almost indistinguishable, and throughout he had heard the constant rattling of dishes as Mrs. Crimmins finished her work in the kitchen below. Steadying himself against one of the bed-posts, he called to the housekeeper, his voice tinged with an edge of panic that was far from pretence.

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And that had been all. The hastily-summoned doctor may have been a bit puzzled by the suddenness of death, but if so, his wonder did not extend to any suspicious questions. The death-certificate had been duly signed, with heart-seizure given as the immediate cause. Blackburn had been careful to avoid the error of being too obviously overcome with grief; the relationship between his wife and himself had never been anything but poorly-disguised enmity, and that fact was known to everyone in the village. Sad, sober in his mourning, he had made the necessary arrangements for burial in the country churchyard and carried them through.

His crowning stroke was to hide both the bottle of acid and the box of cyanide pellets beneath the cerements in those moments he had requested to be alone with his wife before the coffin-lid was screwed down . . .

Yes, it had been so easy! He felt the tremor return and gripped his knee with his free hand, fighting down a momentary panic that he knew was truly unfounded. There could be no questions; there had been no slips. A laugh of successful attainment welled within him, replacing the panic; a wide grin, part relief and part hysteria, twisted his lips. And at that moment the wrinkled face of one of the walking mourners bobbed up beside the carriage window, peering curiously in at him.

The horrible smile froze on his lips. Idiot! he cried to himself, recoiling into the deeper shadows of the rocking vehicle. Fool, fool! Control yourself! To be observed laughing at a time like this!

A lurch of the carriage and the hobbling figure had disappeared into the gloom behind. The dark moor swayed past as he slowly regained control, but he was certain there must already be whispering groups in the rutted road behind, marking and discussing his idiotic grin . . .

In the days that followed, Martin Blackburn watched anxiously for any sign that his suspicious demeanor on the day of the funeral had become public knowledge, but to all appearances it had passed unnoticed. At least, those with whom he came into contact never seemed to reveal by word or deed that they had heard of the incident, or, having heard of it, had put any suspicious interpretation upon it. He gave himself over to the running of the farm, his inner turmoil assuaged.

The question of getting in touch with the solicitors who handled his wife's estate was one to which he gave careful thought. There was a certain correct timing necessary, for he felt that to be

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either too precipitous or too hesitant might be equally damaging. He had finally decided that an inspection of his wife's papers would be of aid in properly assessing the matter, when he received his second shock.

He had gone to her bedroom for the papers he knew his wife had kept in an old wooden trunk-case bound with leather straps. After closing the door of the room, he pulled the trunk from the closet and kneeling beside it, threw back the lid. Atop the pile of papers lay some old daguerreotypes of his wife and members of her family, shiny, stiff relics now turned purplish-brown with age.

He was removing these to rummage underneath when he heard the door open and felt, rather than saw, the cold eye of the housekeeper upon him. The dread panic he had suppressed rose within him again. Too early, you fool! he thought, almost snarling in his self-disgust. You appear too anxious!

He turned his head, afraid to meet the suspicion in her eyes, and spoke dully. "Yes, Mrs. Crimmins? You wanted something?"

Even the slight hesitation in her reply was accusative.

"The roses," she finally said, and he could hear the sarcasm behind the innocent words, "the ones outside her window—this window. They're all brown and burned, like. I thought you might want to—" She stopped.

The roses! Of course—the acid he had thrown out the window! He fought down the gush of fear, his anger at himself suddenly shifted to this implacable nemesis above him, watching him coldly, silently taunting him. His voice lost control.

"Get out! At once, do you hear? Leave the house! Go to the village; anything, anywhere, but get out!" And then he added with quiet hatred: "You will never disturb me when I am in this room!"

He slumped there with head bent, like a gyved body awaiting the executioner's axe, and heard the door close and a few moments later, the creak of the outside gate. For one wonderful moment he felt a sudden peace at the silence, at being alone, at the feeling of motionlessness that possessed him.

But his flare of temper had been foolhardy, and he knew it. He had come to consider himself two people: the careful, clever, watchful man who had carried out the audacious plan of murder with no oversights; and a blind, raving fool seemingly intent upon destroying everything with the ill-advised and reckless actions of a maniac. Now, still kneeling in the quiet room beside the empty four-poster, he clenched and

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unclenched his trembling fingers and in a steady, maddening monotone cursed all his enemies, but particularly the most dangerous of all, that second Martin Blackburn inside him.

To lose his control with Mrs. Crimmins, of all people! With her steel-trap mouth, her rigid bewhiskered lips, her icy eyes! He could hear her now, bending over the cluster of attentive heads in the village, whispering her suspicions, telling of the discord between Loretta and himself, the evidence of his guilty conscience, remarking on the suddenness of her death when she obviously had been recovering . . .

He could hear it all, see the lifted eyebrows, the slowly nodding heads. With a sudden resurgence of fury he slammed the lid shut on the battered chest and arising, kicked it violently against the wall. He stumbled down the stairs and sought to calm his nerves with huge gulps of brandy.

His third shock came the following day, although it was postponed until the evening. He was sitting, staring somberly into a glowing fire, when Mrs. Crimmins came in and announced with obvious satisfaction that the constable had come to see him. Behind her as she spoke, there appeared the gross figure of the village's only police-officer, but before Blackburn could leap from his chair, the constable came forward eyeing him steadily.

"Me wife was after sayin'," mumbled the constable with an implied *non sequitur* that held Blackburn bound to his chair with terror, "that a game of draughts might be what 'e gentleman was needin'." He shook his head lugubriously. "Not that I 'ave any 'opes of winnin'—at draughts, that is—but . . ." He allowed the words to trail off in silence.

Blackburn choked down the hysterical laugh that was inadvertently rising in his throat; it had been just such a nervous laugh that had been the first link in his chain of adversity. So it was to be cat-and-mouse, eh? The full import of the danger seemed to wipe away all fear and substitute a new watchfulness.

And with it a new decision: to-night *he* would take charge, and not his stupid, reckless *alter ego*. His mind seemed clear and sharp for the first time since the funeral, his fear and panic for the first time under confident control.

To an impartial observer, the game of draughts might have served as a pleasant example of an ordinary evening's entertainment in that solid, dependable Victorian year, with the portly housekeeper stepping from the kitchen on occasion to see that the ale-mugs were well-filled and the tin of biscuits ready at hand.

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Although it was late spring and a full moon glanced in at the narrow recessed windows, the fire was kept burning brightly and, together with several tapers, provided the light by which the two men played.

To a less impartial observer, the scene would have blended the dramatic with the grotesque. In the flickering shadows cast by the flames, the two men presented a sharp contrast: Blackburn, thin and tense, making contemptuously swift moves and then falling back in his chair to search the face of his opponent for some key to his thoughts; the constable, bulky and stolid, his heavy fingers curled in hesitation over this chequer or that, puffing on his stubby pipe with the rhythm of breathing, his eyes fixed steadily on the board before him.

Blackburn, in a sudden, crystal clarity of perception, almost smiled. His enemies also made mistakes. The patent hollowness of the constable's excuse to visit the farm; the regularity of Mrs. Crimmins' inspection from the doorway—all a bit too obvious. They were trying to wear him down, wait him out, force his nerve to fail. The careful plotter within him studied the scene impassionately, answering each move of his opponent rapidly, paying small attention to that game; but watching, watching, in the larger game.

When at last Blackburn had been defeated and the pieces laid back in their box, he felt a surge of relief, a feeling that he had withstood the preliminary assault on his nerves, and was prepared for the next attack. But the constable, muttering something about an early rising, swallowed the remainder of his ale and left soon after. Blackburn returned to his chair in suspicious doubt. Was it possible their plan was a different one? Quite obviously it was. His fears began swiftly to gather once again.

It was quite apparent that any hopes of safety that he might have cherished regarding his idiotic laugh on returning from the funeral were pure self-deception. Of course the grin had been noted; how could it have been otherwise? It was equally evident that Mrs. Crimmins had spread her tale in all directions. The visit of the constable had not been very subtle, but in truth what need did they have for subtlety?

There was, of course, one saving grace: there could be no evidence, no proof. The suspicions which his stupid actions had aroused might have convinced the police that he had murdered his wife, but if he kept his wits—and if that damned idiotic beast within him made no future slips—they could never prove anything against him. There were no traces of cyanide gas, certainly not after

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this length of time. And an autopsy would not—

An autopsy! Suddenly he sat upright. The bottle of acid, the box of pellets! A paralysing cold hand gripped his stomach. You fool! he cried to himself. You utter, complete, unmitigated fool! The dozens of places you might have hidden them, the hundreds of ways you might have destroyed them! To leave them where their mute testimony was bound to be fatal! All other thoughts were swept from his mind. He had to get the bottle and box from the coffin!

He arose from his chair, shaking, and called out to Mrs. Crimmins. She hurried in from the kitchen, drying her hands, eyeing him slyly. He forced himself to disregard the cynicism he saw in her eyes and to keep his voice down.

"Mrs. Crimmins," he said steadying himself against the fireplace, "there is no need for you to remain any longer to-night. You may leave things as they are. I—I have some accounts to go over and I—I would rather not be disturbed."

He seemed to hear his own voice as from a far distance. There was something dream-like in the housekeeper's getting her wrap-around and kerchief something unreal in watching her move to the door. The sound of her footfalls hurrying down the path seemed to come to him through a misty curtain, like distant, imagined echoes. He placed his shaking hands over his eyes, forcing his tired brain to plan.

Several brandies seemed partially to dissipate the fog in his head, and then he set to work. Wrapping a scarf about his neck, he went quickly to the stables, saddled a horse, and led the animal to the shed where the tools were kept.

Somewhere from within his hot, pounding head a cold voice seemed to direct his movements; he acted on this innner compulsion. His own emotions flickered in and out of focus, now filling him with dread, and alternately disappearing into a warm, soft lassitude.

He found himself riding furiously along the hard road to the cemetery, one hand gripping the reins, the other holding a shovel tightly across the pommel. The damp night air seemed to clear his brain, and he saw again the terrible position he was in. Terror came with awareness as he spurred his horse even more fiercely over the rolling moor.

The churchyard cemetery appeared above a rise in the road, the ancient fence and drooping trees momentarily silhouetted against the white disk of the full moon. Blackburn threw himself from the saddle, dropping the reins to the ground, hurrying

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through the scattered monuments to the relatively fresh mound covering his wife's grave. Without a pause he began to dig, his heart pounding, his breath harsh in the night silence.

A sudden sound brought him to a startled standstill and he stopped, panting, to search the gloom. It was only his horse, untethered, moving away in the darkness. For an instant he contemplated going after it, but the urgency of his mission forced him to abandon the idea. With a choked curse he threw himself back into his labors, tearing at the stubborn earth, flinging the dirt from the grave with frenzied, jerking motions. The bright moon threw wavering shadows over the scene, and the rising wind whispered through the overhanging branches bent in solemn contemplation of the weird view below.

Suddenly metal grated on wood. With a savage grunt of satisfaction he redoubled his efforts, scraping the clinging clods from the coffin-lid with the edge of the shovel. The moon peered over the rim of the black pit, throwing into relief the struggling, disheveled figure, the partially uncovered coffin.

Blackburn slipped the edge of the shovel under one corner of the lid, pressing the shovel down with a strength born of desperation; with a sharp tearing sound the screws ripped free and a board came away. Bits of dried earth fell into the opening, covering the half-exposed sunken face within.

With frantic haste Blackburn dropped to his knees, slipping his fingers beneath the cerements, searching for the containers. One came to hand readily; he slid it into his pocket and continued his search.

Where could the other have gotten to? He reached further, feeling the weight of the lifeless body pressing against his fingers, the rough wood of the coffin scraping the skin. And then he had it! And at the same moment he became aware of the commotion above him.

There was a flickering of a bull's-eye lantern thrust over the edge of the grave. He heard his name being called.

"Hold on! Mr. Blackburn! None of that, now!"

No sound could make itself issue from his paralysed throat. He made one move towards the far wall of the shallow pit, stumbling over the coffin, spurning the huge arm extended in his direction. His eyes bulged in terror, searching for escape. There was none. With his mouth open in a vain attempt to scream his rage, his frustration, he tore the cover from the box in his hand and dropped a pellet down his throat . . .

The old crone had few oppor-

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tunities to bask in public attention, and she didn't mean to let this one pass by. Her hand gripped the polished rail of the witnessbox of the coroner's inquest like a vulture's talon.

"'So bin to 'is elf, 'e was," she said. "I seed 'im through the carriage winder arter the funeral. Ah, it were darkish an' me eyes mayn't be what they was, but I seed 'im clear enough. Her dyin' 'it im 'arder not he let on. It allus does," she added, picturing with dark satisfaction the future reaction of her own undemonstrative husband at her demise.

"There he was," Mrs. Crimmins told the solemn court-room. "Poor man! Going over her old tintypes, one by one. And me, like the fool I be, disturbing the poor man in his sorrow. Oh, he felt it deep, never you mind!"

"I knowed it was still botherin' the poor man," the constable said with a sad shake of his head. "'im losin' a game o' draughts to the likes o' me! Then when Mrs. Crimmins comed over t'house sayin' she was sure 'e meant to 'arm 'isself, well, I 'ad to get young Griggs an' the others, didn't I? And o' course we wasted time lookin' about 'is 'ouse and the barns afore we even thought of 'e cemetery." He shook his head in the ensuing silence.

"Anyway," he resumed, "if 'e 'adn't done it with one o' them pills, 'ed of jumped off a bridge, or 'ung isself. When they're grievin' deep like that, there ain't never no stoppin' them."

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a *NEW* crime story by

SIMON TROY

Roger Railton was an organized man—methodical, precise, careful, with everything planned in advance to the smallest detail. So when he decided to murder his wife, he brought his talent for exact order into full operation . . .

We would like to pay Simon Troy a great compliment: while reading his new story, "The Liquidation File," we were strongly reminded of the late Roy Vickers' crime short stories. Mr. Vickers added detection to his marvelous tales of the Department of Dead Ends, and we now urge Mr. Troy to try his hand at a series of contemporary "inverted detective" stories. Create a new Department, Mr. Troy, especially for EQMM . . .

THE LIQUIDATION FILE

by SIMON TROY

ROGER RAILTON WAS A METHODICAL man. When he decided to murder his wife he opened a file and put *Ag. (L)* at the top right-hand corner.

All the details of his private and business life were highly organized. His wife's name was Agnes. The *L* stood for *Liquidation,* a euphemism which offended him less than the word beginning with *M.*

The first entry he made in that file was headed *B.S.* Somebody had to dance at the end of Railton's second string, and it might as well be someone he disliked, someone dangerous to him. Bernard Saunders was such a man.

Agnes had to die for several reasons, all of them adequate. She represented £100,000 he would never lay his hands on otherwise—the present value of her shares in the company, left to her by her father. She was the one factor in his life he had never been able to organize. Cool, aloof, reserved, she had all the mulish obstinacy so often found in those

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women who apparently wouldn't say boo to a goose. She was resilient. He could bend Agnes a long way, but she never broke. She always came back to right where she started from.

Also, she knew him, through and through—his cruelty, his rank dishonesty, his womanizing.

Agnes was fifteen years younger than Roger Railton. He had set about the business of marrying her just as methodically as he was now planning her exit from the scene. As the Managing Director's daughter, she was worth a little trouble on Roger's part.

Railton was Managing Director now, following his father-in-law's death. But he wasn't done with the family—oh, no! Agnes had what she called her obligations. She made a point of raising her voice at every Board meeting. She was a thorn, a dagger in Railton's side. So was Saunders. He'd come into the firm four years ago—a specialist in heat-resisting alloys, a brilliant metallurgist, a forceful chap who had ideas and could put them over. Railton's co-directors had been pressing a long time for Saunders to be appointed to the Board of Directors. So far, Railton had successfully resisted, but he knew the tide was running against him.

Yet Agnes, in spite of her interfering ways and the support she gave Saunders at Board meetings, might have survived if only she had been organizable. Roger Railton's day was precisely ordered from his rising to his going to bed. He always knew exactly where he would be at, say, 5:07 a week from next Wednesday. Whereas Agnes neither knew nor cared where she would be or what she would be doing a half hour from now.

Bernard Saunders, in spite of his knowledge and skill, was cast in a mold similar to Agnes'. He was deceptively lazy, easy-going, and good-humored. It irked Railton that Saunders' approach should be so nonchalant, and yet so productive. Not only did he get through an infernal lot of work, but he preserved his popularity at the factory as well.

So much for justification. Now, the means—

Bernard Saunders was coming into Roger's office now, a big pipe between his teeth. He nodded casually as he closed the door. He accorded Railton a measure of polite respect, but his whole manner indicated that he wasn't the man to grovel before the Managing Director of a smallish factory on the outskirts of a smallish town.

"About those struts," he said. "I've had a report from the stress boys and they're fifty percent plus. That'll do for me. Give me the okay and I'll get the job tooled up."

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"Deadline is the fifteenth of next month," Railton said.

"You'll get 'em."

Railton glanced at a desk pad. "Your holidays start on the eighth. I suppose you've taken that into account?"

"I said you'll get the stuff and you will. If necessary, I'll postpone my three weeks to September."

"But you're here on the holiday list—"

"Scrub the list!"

"Surely you've already made arrangements? Plane reservations, hotels, and so on?"

"Me?" Saunders roared with laughter. "Not on your sweet nelly! Might go tramping in Dorset, might go to Istanbul. I'll work that out in the ticket office at Victoria when the time comes."

When Bernard Saunders had gone, Railton opened his file. *SAUNDERS, Bernard, 34, unmarried, no feminine attachments or interests. Service flat on The Parkway.*

He passed a big plump hand over his bald head and thought. Thought hard.

Roger was in no hurry. Such things should be approached calmly, objectively, carefully.

The next conversation he had with Saunders was at the Unionist Ball, held a little way out of town at Lord Vardy's place. Railton had no urgent political loyalties, but social life can't be entirely ignored in a satellite community 30 miles from London. He took Agnes, of course. One has to keep up pretenses.

A few of the boys were there, competitors who would grab Saunders if they had a chance. Railton towered above them at the bar—he was a big powerful man—and talked in a patronizing sort of way. Bernard Saunders was cheerful but steady after a few drinks. Rooke, the company's Secretary, was talking to Dwyer, the Export Manager. One of Railton's competitors was staring mournfully into his glass and shaking his head.

"Your wife's father would turn in his grave if he saw what you've done to the old place," he said.

"My wife's father was old-fashioned—he wasn't in touch."

"You mean he wasn't so bloody avaricious as you are. Special alloys—why, you've chivvied around for the sake of a few tin-pot contracts and lost half the reputation he took a lifetime to build up. And you'd have lost the other half if Saunders hadn't put the brake on."

"It's a matter of organization," Railton said. He looked vaguely round the big overheated room. "Where's Agnes, I wonder?"

"Sitting it out behind the potted palms," Rooke suggested.

Bernard Saunders took another glass from a convenient tray:

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"You can have too much damned organization," he said. "That's your chief trouble, Railton."

Railton's dislike welled up. Saunders' use of his surname was deliberate, a calculated slight.

"What's my chief trouble?" he asked.

"You could organize anything from a flea circus to a nuclear war, but there's never any elasticity about your plans. They don't *bend*. Where are you if anything goes haywire? The man who keeps the wind in his sails is the one who can change course at a moment's notice."

"Change course!" Railton repeated slowly. "Oh, but that's where you're wrong! I can change course with the next. You see, Bernard boy, my mind's organized as well as my habits. Give me just fifteen seconds and I'll have scrapped one line of action and taken up another—and that goes for poker or running the show that pays your damned inflated salary."

Saunders clapped him on the shoulder. "I'm proud to work for you, Railton!"

None of this had been quite accidental. Railton knew exactly what he was doing.

He rescued his wife from the arms of a languid junior executive. Agnes had never been a vividly pretty girl, but she had charm, and she looked very young and attractive now as she smiled up at her husband. Mockery, of course, was behind the smile. Others might not notice it, but Railton did.

"You know my wife?" he said to Saunders, who was passing.

"We've met," Saunders said. "How d'you do, Mrs. Railton."

"I'm hot and tired," she said. "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

Railton gave her one, and lit it.

"It's late," he said, "but I want to see a man named Dean on some business. He's staying overnight at the Victoria Hotel. Shall you wait till I come back, Agnes? Or perhaps Saunders could drop you off on his way home. That would save me the trip back."

"Glad to," Saunders agreed. "Give me a nudge when you're ready to leave, Mrs. Railton. I'll be at the bar."

There was no man named Dean staying at the Victoria. Nor did Railton go there or even leave Lord Vardy's premises, though he kept out of his wife's way, and Saunders'. He kept his eye on them till they both left about 12:45, then he made his way back to the bar for a nightcap.

After a carefully timed interval he touched Rooke's shoulder. "Have you seen my wife?" he asked.

"Lost her again?" Rooke inquired with alcoholic gravity. "Last time I saw her she was talking to you."

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"That was an hour ago." Railton glanced irritably at his watch. "Damned odd."

He drifted away, spoke to two or three people, and returned to the bar with a carefully simulated expression of mild anxiety on his heavy face. He said once again that it was damned odd.

"What's odd?" Rooke asked.

"I can't find my wife. Where's Saunders? Has he gone home?"

"Saunders?" Rooke surveyed the crowd, thinner now than an hour ago. "Haven't seen him for quite a while."

Railton said in a sharper voice to Dwyer, "Have *you* seen my wife?"

"Had a dance with her around nine," Dwyer said. "Haven't seen her since then."

"I wonder if Saunders . . ."

"What's that about Saunders again?" Rooke asked.

"Nothing." Roger shook his head, well aware that both men were looking at him with mouths slightly open. "Seems queer, that's all."

He didn't say what seemed queer, which only added to their curiosity.

Roger drove home, feeling moderately well-pleased with himself.

Home was a large, fairly modern structure set among trees near the river, well away from the industrial smoke that the town produced. It was a house without servants, except for day help—a factor Roger had carefully considered.

He garaged his car and let himself in. Agnes was kneeling in front of the fire. There was no sign of Saunders.

"He had a drink and went home," she said indifferently.

A slight disappointment. Some mutual attraction between Agnes and Saunders would have helped, but perhaps that was too much to expect. Agnes was as frigid as a December morning and Bernard Saunders was obsessed with his work. Fortunately, the ultimate issue was out of their hands.

"I sometimes wonder why you bother to go to these affairs," he said. "If it's too much trouble to make yourself plesant to my business associates—"

"I don't care for them."

"I don't care for them," he mimicked. "I wonder what you do care for?"

She looked at him over her shoulder, her brown hair shining in the firelight. "Kindness, and perhaps a little flattery sometimes. Quiet pleasant things that you consider a complete waste of time. But most of all, kindness."

He stared down at her. She was so much stronger than he was. He could snap every bone in her body, but he could never quench the mocking gleam in her eyes.

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"You checked so many things before you married me," she told him. "Other things, maybe more important, you missed . . . You wanted money so badly, didn't you?"

"Most people do. And talking of money, *your* money, if you've changed your mind about the offer I made—"

"I haven't. You didn't do quite as you liked in my father's day. You won't in mine."

And by saying that, he thought grimly, *you've put the seal on your own death warrant.*

For some weeks Roger Railton had been painstakingly copying his wife's handwriting.

A few days after the Unionist dance he wrote an entirely imaginary letter from his wife to an entirely imaginary character, then promptly burned it. This was not such lunacy as it appeared to be. He wanted, not the letter, but its impression on the page underneath.

When Rooke came into the office the following afternoon, he found Railton standing near the window with a sheet of blank paper in one hand and a magnifying lens in the other. It was a posture and a preoccupation so emphatically out of character that Rooke stared in astonishment. Railton glanced up and hurriedly stuffed the paper into his pocket.

He came back to his desk, and Rooke opened a folder, drawing Roger's attention to the columns of figures. But for once—indeed, for the first time in Rooke's memory—Railton's mind did not appear to be on his work.

"Is anything wrong, Mr. Railton?" he asked.

"Wrong? What the hell should be wrong?"

"I thought you seemed a bit upset, that's all."

Railton was breathing hard. "Nothing, nothing."

He bent over the accounts that Rooke had brought in, then suddenly pushed them away and smacked his hand down on the desk. "I wonder how far you're to be trusted?" he said, well-knowing that the distance could be measured in millimeters. "What d'you make of this?"

Rooke took the sheet of paper. "It's blank," he said.

"The sheet above it wasn't."

Rooke gave him a keen glance, then peered again at the sheet. "Your sight's better than mine."

"What about the third line? Is that word *better?*"

"Could be."

"Follow that line on. And the next."

Rooke sat down and gave the sheet his full attention. "Where did you get this?" he asked, after several minutes of scrutiny.

"Never mind where I got it." Railton reached for the sheet and held one of the corners over his

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cigarette lighter. He dropped the curling ash into the wastebasket. "Best thing to do with it. Shouldn't have bothered you, but—"

He mopped his forehead. "Get me a glass of water, Rooke. And oblige me by forgetting about this, will you?"

Rooke brought the glass of water and went out. Railton's eyes followed his progress along the corridor. How long before Rooke told someone?—in strictest confidence, of course. Not long. Give him a mere quarter of an hour.

Rooke, as the firm's Secretary, was perfectly well-acquainted with Agnes' signature. Though not, perhaps, with those scraps of frustrated sentiment expressed on that sheet and now burned beyond further reference.

Some circumstances intolerable ... Better perhaps to die if one had the courage ...

Railton smiled craftily to himself. The subtle touch! *Today has seemed like twenty days ... If you mean all you say then for heaven's sake ...*

Nothing extravagant, no purple prose. Agnes wasn't that kind.

He drank the water that Rooke had brought. Nothing like being thorough.

By Saturday he was conscious of Rooke's curious stare whenever he encountered the man. Rooke and Dwyer were members of the same golf club. There was a perceptible difference in Dwyer's manner too. A slight—could it be concern, a man-to-man sympathy?

For a week Railton sat tight, carefully cultivating that preoccupied manner. It was late on Friday evening when he strolled along the corridor to the Export Department. The staff had left, and Dwyer was clearing his desk.

"When is Saunders putting that strut job into production?" Railton asked.

"It's jigged up," Dwyer told him. "Only a matter of days to run the lot off."

Railton nodded. "Is Saunders anywhere about?"

"Maybe in the staff canteen. He's working late tonight."

Railton went to the door, then turned round. "By the way, was Saunders working late last Wednesday?"

"Wednesday?" Dwyer's eyes veered sharply. "Couldn't say offhand."

"After—say, eight o'clock?"

"I'd gone home myself before then. Why all this about Saunders?"

"Eh? Oh, nothing, nothing. Don't mention it to him, will you? It was—well, just a notion, that's all."

Tongue in cheek, he left Dwyer to make what he could of it.

There was no light in Saunders' office. Railton slipped quietly

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inside. Saunders kept a little-used briefcase behind the filing cabinet. He found it, took the small risk, and carried it to his own office.

The gambit was over, and Railton was now ready for the middle game. One small touch, and he supplied it on Monday. Seeing Rooke's angular shadow on the ribbed-glass door, he picked up the phone and pretended to be talking into it when Rooke entered.

"No, no, no!" he was saying. "I want somebody discreet. Not some clodhopping retired bobby. Somebody—"

He looked across the desk at Rooke. "Damn it, man, can't you knock before you come in?"

"I did knock, Mr. Railton."

Later that afternoon Rooke and Dwyer left together as usual. They were in earnest conversation, and Railton could guess what they were talking about.

The one uncooperative factor was Bernard Saunders himself.

Several times since the dance at Lord Vardy's place, Railton had suggested that he should come round to the house for dinner, but Saunders had offered excuses and made it quite plain that after working hours he was interested neither in Railton's home nor in Railton's wife.

But that was only a minor snag. Railton was now planning the endgame.

Agnes had gone to see a movie. He went to her bedroom and spent a cautious half hour among the fripperies he found in her wardrobe, the tallboy, and her dressing-table drawers. He worked to a meticulous plan, smiling sourly as he handled his wife's more intimate garments. He chose carefully, packing into her lightweight weekend bag only such things as she was not likely to miss within the next day or two—two dresses, a silk nightgown, stockings; he had made a list of everything she would be likely to take. He concealed the bag in his own room, and proceeded to the next item on his criminous agenda.

This was Bernard Saunders' briefcase. In it he placed a number of securities, quietly accumulated at various times within the past few months. Their theft would be possible to Saunders, for Railton had kept them in a locked drawer of his desk, and at the last moment he would break open that drawer, as Saunders could easily have done.

When the briefcase too was safely hidden, he poured a liberal helping of whiskey and made himself comfortable in front of the fire. He projected himself into tomorrow, thinking of it as a third-person story. Closing his eyes, he visualized it exactly the way it would happen. He heard the words, felt the emotions. And

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realized the deep satisfaction that he would experience when the whole plan was fully carried out.

Tomorrow afternoon he would go to London and take a room at a small hotel where he had often stayed before. Shortly before five o'clock he would ring the factory and ask for Saunders.

"You, Saunders? Yes, I know you're busy, but I've got Mellars here. He's talking about another modification on his duct system. I've told him we're all tied up and it's out of the question at the old contract price, but you know how he is. Could you come up and talk him out of it?"

Saunders would look at his watch, grunt a reply.

"I know, Saunders, it's a damn nuisance. Still, you could come up on the 8:10 and be home again by midnight. Yes, at Russell Court—I'll have Mellars in the bar, well-oiled if possible. Okay? Oh, and by the way, could you drop off at my home and ask my wife for the large manila envelope I left on my desk? Some figures relevant to Mellars' complaint."

Another grunt from Saunders.

"It won't be far out of your way—drop off on your way to the station. Unless you're going to drive into London, of course—If anything turns up at this end and I can save you the trip I'll phone you at my home. I'll phone at 7:55 sharp—that'll still give you time to make the 8:10 if I can't manage without you."

Saunders would know what *sharp* meant—Railton's *sharp*. Not six minutes to eight, or four, but *five*.

Railton would then have a light snack, check out of his room, and make his leisurely way out of London. And within a couple of hours he would be a sorrowing widower.

For the final scenes he had aimed at absolute simplicity. Guns, poisons—all such comparatively tricky methods were out. Agnes was to be killed by her lover, Bernard Saunders, an unscrupulous rascal who had broken open his employer's desk and stuffed his briefcase with the securities he knew, through Agnes, would be there. He had induced Agnes to pack her most attractive night attire, ready for a quick getaway. Then, the two lovers would quarrel . . .

Perhaps Agnes would have last-minute qualms, and Saunders would lose his temper with her. Railton had to kill his wife in such a way that an intelligent Coroner would credit Saunders with her death. So, how does one kill in a lovers' quarrel?

One shakes the shoulders, makes a grab for the throat, and almost before one is aware of it the vital spark is quenched.

That was how it would be.

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Then, hide behind the curtains. Wait for Saunders, innocently calling for that manila envelope and hoping that a phone call at 7:55 sharp will save him a trip to London. Saunders coming in, rushing to the body prostrate on the carpet, dropping on his knees beside it.

Then, enter the avenger. Agnes dead, Saunders bending over her. The poker snatched from the hearth . . . What temporarily demented husband would do less?

Strike at Saunders, again and again. Now draw the dead Agnes' nails down Saunders' face. Pull a button from Saunders' coat and place it between the woman's clenched fingers.

Nothing much else. Only the lightweight bag with its frothy fripperies to put in the hall, the loaded briefcase beside it, both ready for the romantic flight that had ended before it began.

Then Railton, crazy with grief, dazed, bewildered, blundering into the police station. The desk sergeant staring. "Well, it's Mr. Railton! Good evening, sir."

Looking with bloodshot eyes at the sergeant. "It—it's my wife. Dead . . . I came back from London . . . unexpectedly. She was dead. Strangled. He was bending over her. *He still had his hands on . . .*"

"Steady, sir! Steady on, now!"

"I hit him with the poker. Who? You won't know him. Fellow named Saunders. Works at my factory. Must have been going on for weeks, months, behind my back . . ."

"Now, sir, if you'll begin at the beginnning—"

"I hit him with the poker. But she's dead, she's dead . . ."

Railton poured another whiskey. Pretty good, considering that his wife and Saunders scarcely knew each other. What would happen? Justifiable homicide? A nominal sentence for manslaughter?

One couldn't quite organize *that*. But Roger Railton was sure that he would be eating his next Christmas dinner at home.

And everything went according to plan.

He left for London shortly after noon, and spent an agreeable afternoon waiting for zero hour. He took a single room at his usual hotel and ordered dinner. At 4:55 he phoned the factory.

He was put through to Saunders, who was curt, saying that he was in the main asssembly shop and up to his eyes. Railton explained the position, and waited for the grunt. It came.

"Can't you deal with that fool Mellars yourself? It's a bit late in the day for him to be coming along with major modifications."

"That's what I want you to tell him," Railton said, and mentioned the manila envelope.

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"Okay," Saunders said in a resigned voice. "Large manila envelope on your desk, and you'll ring at five to eight if I'm to cancel the trip."

Railton put down the phone and ordered a light snack. An hour later he was checking out. The room clerk looked down his nose. "Sudden change of plan, Mr. Railton?"

"Say a sudden premonition," Railton said. "A feeling that something's wrong."

"I know, sir. Like somebody walking over your grave."

Railton nodded and made his way to the hotel garage. He was driving up Finchley Road when the odd train of thought occurred to him . . .

It was going to happen!

And what, when you came to think of it, had Agnes done to finish up on the rug with a purple throat and staring eyes? Or Saunders, for that matter, to lie beside her with brains and blood oozing into the rug? Was it because Roger needed or even wanted them dead, or was it because he was caught like a fly in the web of his own organizing abilities?

He could call it off any moment, of course. He braked violently as a car jumped the traffic light at Swiss Cottage; sweat oozed into his eyes. But he *couldn't* call it off—because in that case he was mad, a stark maniac, and lunatics have to go right on to the end of the road just to prove they're sane.

He took a grip on himself. Over the North Circular, onto the motorway. Mad as a hatter. Sane as a—now, what were you as sane as? Couldn't remember. Didn't matter, anyway . . .

It was 7:40 when he parked his car at the edge of a convenient spinney and let himself silently into the house by the little-used side entrance.

There was a light in his wife's bedroom. He could hear her footsteps as he stood in the dark hall, listening intently. He would have to call her down, for the "liquidation" had to be staged in the living room. The poker and curtained hiding place made that imperative.

Upstairs a door slammed shut. He stepped into the small cloakroom under the stairs. Then his blood froze as he heard her voice.

"Bernard!" she called from the top of the stairs. "Bernard, I can't find my bag. A little weekend case . . ."

In the darkness Railton put out both hands to grasp at something, but there was nothing to grasp. Now he heard Saunders' voice from the living room.

"Damn the bag! Put what you need in something else. I'll buy you another bag. Let's get out of here before he comes back."

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A silence, then his wife's voice again. "You're sure, Bernard? Sure it's the right thing for us to do?"

"What's *right,* what's *wrong?*" demanded Saunders. "You're coming with me now—before he kills what's left of you. Come on, let's get out of here."

The click of a light switch, the slam of another door. Railton's groping fingers grasped something at last. An empty coat hook. He gripped it, swung on it, suspended above the chasm of his future.

He'd never known, never even guessed.

Saunders, coming straight over the moment he knew the coast was clear. That hadn't been in Roger's carefully planned schedule.

Railton remembered the dance at Lord Vardy's place. What had he said to Saunders? *I can change course with the next . . . Give me just fifteen seconds . . .*

Fifteen seconds. Time to assimilate all the details of a new situation and devise a new means to cope with it.

"Eight, nine, ten—" he muttered to himself.

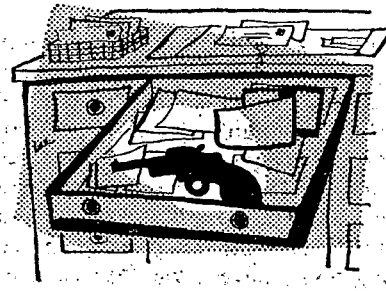
They were going through the front door. Saunders' car would be parked there. Railton swallowed the bitter pill—if he'd come that way instead of using the side door, he'd have seen it, he would have been able to think of something.

He blundered after them.

He was an organized man, wasn't he?

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen . . .

But Saunders' car was already turning off into the quiet suburban road, and then it picked up speed.



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a NEW 87th Precinct SHORT NOVEL by

ED McBAIN

complete in this issue

Another short novel about the 87th Precinct . . . one night in the lives and deaths of the men of the 87th—detectives Steve Carella, Cotton Hawes, Bert Kling, Meyer Meyer, and the rest of the squad . . . one night that is a microcosm of a metropolis—a mosaic of murder, vandalism, ghosts (!), bombing, theft, of missing persons, junkies, pushers, drunk-and-disorderlies, burglars, muggers—you name it, it swims into the orbit of a Precinct Station in a big city when "paradoxically, the night people take over in the morning."

This short novel is the newest of Ed McBain's strictly American police procedurals—with the hard smack of realism and the interweaving, intertwining, interacting, interlinking of all-in-the-night's-work at the 87th Precinct . . .

NIGHTSHADE

by ED McBAIN

THE MORNING HOURS OF THE night come imperceptibly here.

It is a minute before midnight on the peeling face of the hanging wall clock, and then it is midnight, and then the minute hand moves visibly and with a lurch into the new day. The morning hours have begun, but scarcely anyone has noticed. The stale coffee in soggy cardboard containers tastes the same as it did thirty seconds ago, the spastic rhythm of the clacking typewriters continues unabated, a drunk across the room shouts that the world is full of brutality, and cigarette smoke drifts up toward the face of the clock where, unnoticed and unmourned, the old

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day has already been dead for two minutes.

Then the telephone rings.

The men in this room are part of a tired routine, somewhat shabby about the edges, as faded and as gloomy as the room itself, with its cigarette-scarred desks and its smudged green walls. This could be the office of a failing insurance company were it not for the evidence of the holstered pistols hanging from belts on the backs of wooden chairs painted a darker green than the walls. The furniture is ancient, the typewriters are ancient, the building itself is ancient—which is perhaps only fitting since these men are involved in what is an ancient pursuit, a pursuit once considered honorable. They are law enforcers. They are, in the mildest words of the drunk still hurling epithets from the grilled detention cage across the room, dirty rotten pigs.

The telephone continues to ring.

The little girl lying in the alley behind the theater was wearing a belted white trench coat wet with blood. There was blood on the floor of the alley, and blood on the metal fire door behind her, and blood on her face and matted in her blonde hair, blood on her miniskirt and on the lavender tights she wore. A neon sign across the street stained the girl's ebbing life juices green and then orange, while from the open knife wound in her chest the blood sprouted like some ghastly night flower, dark and rich, red, orange green, pulsing in time to the neon flicker—a grotesque psychedelic light show, and then losing the rhythm, welling up with less force and power.

She opened her mouth, she tried to speak, and the scream of an ambulance approaching the theater seemed to come from her mouth on a fresh bubble of blood. The blood stopped, her life ended, the girl's eyes rolled back into her head.

Detective Steve Carella turned away as the ambulance attendant rushed a stretcher into the alley. He told them the girl was dead.

"We got here in seven minutes," one of the attendants said.

"Nobody's blaming you," Carella answered.

"This is Saturday night," the attendant complained. "Streets are full of traffic. Even *with* the damn siren."

Carella walked to the unmarked sedan parked at the curb. Detective Cotton Hawes, sitting behind the wheel, rolled down his frost-rimed window and said, "How is she?"

"We've got a homicide," Carella answered.

The boy was 18 years old, an

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he had been picked up not ten minutes ago for breaking off car aerials. He had broken off twelve on the same street, strewing them behind him like a Johnny Appleseed planting radios; a cruising squad car had spotted him as he tried to twist off the aerial of a 1966 Cadillac. He was drunk or stoned or both, and when Sergeant Murchison at the muster desk asked him to read the Miranda-Escobedo warning signs on the wall, printed in both English and Spanish, he could read neither.

The arresting patrolman took the boy to the squad room upstairs, where Detective Bert Kling was talking to Hawes on the telephone. Kling signaled for the patrolman to wait with his prisoner on the bench outside the slatted wooden rail divider, and then buzzed Murchison at the desk downstairs.

"Dave," he said, "we've got a homicide in the alley of the Eleventh Street Theater. You want to get it rolling?"

"Right," Murchison said, and hung up.

Homicides are a common occurrence in this city, and each one is treated identically, the grisly horror of violent death reduced to routine by a police force that would otherwise be overwhelmed by statistics. At the muster desk upstairs Kling waved the patrolman and his prisoner into the squadroom, Sergeant Murchison first reported the murder to Captain Frick, who commanded the 87th Precinct, and then to Lieutenant Byrnes, who commanded the 87th Detective Squad. He then phoned Homicide, who in turn set into motion an escalating process of notification that included the Police Laboratory, the Telegraph, Telephone and Teletype Bureau at Headquarters, the Medical Examiner, the District Attorney, the District Commander of the Detective Division, the Chief of Detectives, and finally the Police Commissioner himself. Someone had thoughtlessly robbed a young woman of her life, and now a lot of sleepy-eyed men were being shaken out of their beds on a cold October night.

Upstairs, the clock on the squadroom wall read 12:30 A.M. The boy who had broken off twelve car aerials sat in a chair alongside Bert Kling's desk. Kling took one look at him and yelled to Miscolo in the Clerical Office to bring in a pot of strong coffee. Across the room the drunk in the detention cage wanted to know where he was. In a little while they would release him with a warning to try to stay sober till morning.

But the night was young.

They arrived alone or in pairs, blowing on their hands, shoulders

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hunched against the bitter cold, breaths pluming whitely from their lips. They marked the dead girl's position in the alleyway, they took her picture, they made drawings of the scene, they searched for the murder weapon and found none, and then they stood around speculating on sudden death. In this alleyway alongside a theater the policemen were the stars and the celebrities, and a curious crowd thronged the sidewalk where a barricade had already been set up, anxious for a glimpse of these men with their shields pinned to their overcoats—the identifying *Playbills* of law enforcement, without which you could not tell the civilians from the plainclothes cops.

Monoghan and Monroe had arrived from Homicide, and they watched dispassionately now as the Assistant Medical Examiner fluttered around the dead girl. They were both wearing black overcoats, black mufflers, and black fedoras; both were heavier men than Carella who stood between them with the lean look of an overtrained athlete, a pained expression on his face.

"He done some job on her," Monroe said.

Monoghan made a rude sound.

"You identified her yet?" Monroe asked.

"I'm waiting for the M.E. to get through," Carella answered.

"Might help to know what she was doing here in the alley. What's that door there?" Monoghan asked.

"Stage entrance."

"Think she was in the show?"

"I don't know," Carella said.

"Well, what the hell," Monroe said, "they're finished with her pocketbook there, ain't they? Why don't you look through it? You finished with that pocketbook there?" he yelled to one of the lab technicians.

"Yeah, anytime you want it," the technician shouted back.

"Go on, Carella, take a look."

The technician wiped the blood off the dead girl's bag, then handed it to Carella. Monoghan and Monroe crowded in on him as he twisted open the clasp.

"Bring it over to the light," Monroe said.

The light, with a metal shade, hung over the stage door. So violently had the girl been stabbed that flecks of blood had even dotted the enameled white underside of the shade. In her bag they found a driver's license identifying her as Mercy Howell of 1113 Rutherford Avenue, Age 24, Height 5′ 3″, Eyes Blue. They found an Actors Equity card in her name, as well as credit cards for two of the city's largest department stores. They found an unopened package of Virginia Slims, and a book of matches advertising an art course. They found a rat-tailed comb. They

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found $17.43. They found a package of Kleenex, and an appointment book. They found a ballpoint pen with shreds of tobacco clinging to its tip, an eyelash curler, two subway tokens, and an advertisement for a see through blouse, clipped from one of the local newspapers.

In the pocket of her trench coat, when the M.E. had finished with her and pronounced her dead from multiple stab wounds in the chest and throat, they found an unfired Browning .25 caliber automatic. They tagged the gun and the handbag, and they moved the girl out of the alleyway and into the waiting ambulance for removal to the morgue. There was now nothing left of Mercy Howell but a chalked outline of her body and a pool of her blood on the alley floor.

"You sober enough to understand me?" Kling asked the boy.

"I was never drunk to begin with," the boy answered.

"Okay then, here we go," Kling said. "In keeping with the Supreme Court decision in Miranda versus Arizona we are not permitted to ask you any questions until you are warned of your right to counsel and your privilege against self-incrimination."

"What does that mean?" the boy asked. "Self-incrimination?"

"I'm about to explain that to you now," Kling said.

"This coffee stinks."

"First, you have the right to remain silent if you so choose," Kling said. "Do you understand that?"

"I understand it."

"Second, you do not have to answer any police questions if you don't want to. Do you understand that?"

"What the hell are you asking me if I understand for? Do I look like a moron or something?"

"The law requires that I ask whether or not you understand these specific warnings. *Did* you understand what I just said about not having to answer?"

"Yeah, yeah, I understood."

"All right. Third, if you do decide to answer any questions, the answers may be used as evidence against you, do you—?"

"What the hell did I do, break off a couple of lousy car aerials?"

"Did you understand that?"

"I understood it."

"You also have the right to consult with an attorney before or during police questioning. If you do not have the money to hire a lawyer, a lawyer will be appointed to consult with you."

Kling gave this warning straight-faced even though he knew that under the Criminal Procedure Code of the city for which he worked, a public defender could not be appointed by the courts until the preliminary hearing. There was no legal pro-

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vision for the courts *or* the police to appoint counsel during questioning, and there were certainly no police funds set aside for the appointment of attorneys. In theory, a call to the Legal Aid Society should have brought a lawyer up there to the old squadroom within minutes, ready and eager to offer counsel to any indigent person desiring it. But in practice, if this boy sitting beside Kling told him in the next three seconds that he was unable to pay for his own attorney and would like one provided, Kling would not have known just what the hell to do—other than call off the questioning.

"I understand," the boy said.

"You've signified that you understand all the warnings," Kling said, "and now I ask you whether you are willing to answer my questions without an attorney here to counsel you."

"Go fly a kite," the boy said. "I don't want to answer nothing."

So that was that.

They booked him for Criminal Mischief, a Class-A Misdemeanor defined as intentional or reckless damage to the property of another person, and they took him downstairs to a holding cell, to await transportation to the Criminal Courts Building for arraignment.

The phone was ringing again, and a woman was waiting on the bench just outside the squadroom.

The watchman's booth was just inside the metal stage door. An electric clock on the wall behind the watchman's stool read 1:10 A.M. The watchman was a man in his late seventies who did not at all mind being questioned by the police. He came on duty, he told them, at 7:30 each night. The company call was for 8:00, and he was there at the stage door waiting to greet everybody as they arrived to get made up and in costume. Curtain went down at 11:20, and usually most of the kids was out of the theater by 11:45 or, at the latest, midnight. He stayed on till 9:00 the next morning, when the theater box office opened.

"Ain't much to do during the night except hang around and make sure nobody runs off with the scenery." he said, chuckling.

"Did you happen to notice what time Mercy Howell left the theater?" Carella asked.

"She the one got killed?" the old man asked.

"Yes," Hawes said. "Mercy Howell. About this high, blonde hair, blue eyes."

"They're all about that high, with blonde hair and blue eyes," the old man said, and chuckled again. "I don't know hardly none of them by name. Shows come and go, you know. Be a hell of a chore to have to remember all the kids who go in and out that door."

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"Do you sit here by the door all night?" Carella asked.

"Well, no, not all night. What I do, I lock the door after everybody's out and then I check the lights, make sure just the work light's on. I won't touch the switchboard, not allowed to, but I can turn out lights in the lobby, for example, if somebody left them on, or down in the toilets—sometimes they leave lights on down in the toilets. Then I come back here to the booth, and read or listen to the radio. Along about two o'clock I check the theater again, make sure we ain't got no fires or nothing, and then I come back here and make the rounds again at four o'clock, and six o'clock, and again about eight. That's what I do."

"You say you lock this door?"

"That's right."

"Would you remember what time you locked it tonight?"

"Oh, must've been about ten minutes to twelve. Soon as I knew everybody was out."

"How do you know when they're out?"

"I give a yell up the stairs there. You see those stairs there? They go up to the dressing rooms. Dressing rooms are all upstairs in this house. So I go to the steps, and I yell 'Locking up! Anybody here?' And if somebody yells back, I know somebody's here, and I say, 'Let's shake it, honey,' if it's a girl, and if it's a boy, I say, 'Let's hurry it up, sonny.'" The old man chuckled again. "With this show it's sometimes hard to tell which's the girls and which's the boys. I manage, though," he said, and again chuckled.

"So you locked the door at ten minutes to twelve?"

"Right."

"And everybody had left the theater by that time?"

"'Cept me, of course."

"Did you look out into the alley before you locked the door?"

"Nope. Why should I do that?"

"Did you hear anything outside *while* you were locking the door?"

"Nope."

"Or at any time *before* you locked it?"

"Well, there's always noise outside when they're leaving, you know. They got friends waiting for them, or else they go home together, you know—there's always a lot of chatter when they go out."

"But it was quiet when you locked the door?"

"Dead quiet," the old man said.

The woman who took the chair beside Detective Meyer Meyer's desk was perhaps 32 years old, with long straight black hair trailing down her back, and wide brown eyes that were terrified. It was still October, and the color of her tailored coat seemed suited to the season, a subtle tangerine

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with a small brown fur collar that echoed an outdoors trembling with the colors of autumn.

"I feel sort of silly about this," she said, "but my husband insisted that I come."

"I see," Meyer said.

"There are ghosts," the woman said.

Across the room Kling unlocked the door to the detention cage and said, "Okay, pal, on your way. Try to stay sober till morning, huh?"

"It ain't one thirty yet," the man said, "the night is young." He stepped out of the cage, tipped his hat to Kling, and hurriedly left the squadroom.

Meyer looked at the woman sitting beside him, studying her with new interest because, to tell the truth, she had not seemed like a nut when she first walked into the squadroom. He had been a detective for more years than he chose to count, and in his time had met far too many nuts of every stripe and persuasion. But he had never met one as pretty as Adele Gorman with her well-tailored, fur-collared coat, and her Vassar voice and her skillfully applied eye makeup, lips bare of color in her pale white face, pert and reasonably young and seemingly intelligent—but apparently a nut besides.

"In the house," she said. "Ghosts."

"Where do you live, ma'am?" he asked. He had written her name on the pad in front of him, and now he watched her with his pencil poised and recalled the lady who had come into the squadroom only last month to report a gorilla peering into her bedroom from the fire escape outside. They had sent a patrolman over to make a routine check, and had even called the zoo and the circus (which coincidentally was in town, and which lent at least some measure of credibility to her claim), but there had been no gorilla on the fire escape, nor had any gorilla recently escaped from a cage. The lady came back the next day to report that her visiting gorilla had put in another appearance the night before, this time wearing a top hat and carrying a black cane with an ivory head. Meyer had assured her that he would have a platoon of cops watching her building that night, which seemed to calm her at least somewhat. He had then led her personally out of the squadroom and down the iron-runged steps, and through the high-ceilinged muster room, and past the hanging green globes on the front stoop, and onto the sidewalk outside the station house. Sergeant Murchison, at the muster desk, shook his head after the lady was gone, and muttered, "More of them outside than in."

Meyer watched Adele Gorman now, remembered what

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Murchison had said, and thought: *Gorillas in September, ghosts in October.*

"We live in Smoke Rise," she said. "Actually, it's my father's house, but my husband and I are living there with him."

"The address?"

"MacArthur Lane—number three hundred seventy-four. You take the first access road into Smoke Rise, about a mile and a half east of Silvermine Oval. The name on the mailbox is Van Houten. That's my father's name. Willem Van Houten." She paused and studied him, as though expecting some reaction.

"Okay," Meyer said, and ran a hand over his bald pate. He looked up and said, "Now, you were saying, Mrs. Gorman—"

"That we have ghosts."

"Uh-huh. What kind of ghosts?"

"Ghosts. Poltergeists. Shades. I don't know," she said, and shrugged. "What kinds of ghosts are there?"

"Well, they're your ghosts, so suppose you tell me," Meyer said.

The telephone on Kling's desk rang. He lifted the receiver and said, "Eighty-seventh, Detective Kling."

"There are two of them," Adele said.

"Male or female?"

"One of each."

"Yeah," Kling said into the telephone, "go ahead."

"How old would you say they were?"

"Centuries, I would guess."

"No, I mean—"

"Oh, how old do they look? Well, the man—"

"You've seen them?"

"Oh, yes, many times."

"Uh-huh," Meyer said.

"I'll be right over," Kling said into the telephone. "You stay there." He slammed down the receiver, opened his desk drawer, pulled out a holstered revolver, and hurriedly clipped it to his belt. "Somebody threw a bomb into a store-front church. One-seven-three-three Culver Avenue. I'm heading over."

"Right," Meyer said. "Get back to me."

"We'll need a couple of meat wagons. The minister and two others were killed, and it sounds as if there're a lot of injured."

"Will you tell Dave?"

"On the way out," Kling said, and was gone.

"Mrs. Gorman," Meyer said, "as you can see, we're pretty busy here just now. I wonder if your ghosts can wait till morning."

"No, they can't," Adele said.

"Why not?"

"Because they appear precisely at two forty-five A.M. and I want someone to see them."

"Why don't you and your husband look at them?" Meyer said.

"You think I'm a nut, don't you?" Adele said.

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"No, no, Mrs. Gorman, not at all."

"Oh, yes you do," Adele said. "I didn't believe in ghosts either—until I saw these two."

"Well, this is all very interesting, I assure you, Mrs. Gorman, but really we do have our hands full right now, and I don't know what we can do about these ghosts of yours, even if we did come over to take a look at them."

"They've been stealing things from us," Adele said, and Meyer thought: *Oh, we have got ourselves a prime lunatic this time.*

"What sort of things?"

"A diamond brooch that used to belong to my mother when she was alive. They stole that from my father's safe."

"What else?"

"A pair of emerald earrings. They were in the safe, too."

"When did these thefts occur?"

"Last month."

"Isn't it possible the jewelry's been mislaid?"

"You don't mislay a diamond brooch and a pair of emerald earrings that are locked inside a wall safe."

"Did you report these thefts?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I knew you'd think I was crazy. Which is just what you're thinking right this minute."

"No, Mrs. Gorman, but I'm sure you can appreciate the fact that we—uh—can't go around arresting ghosts," Meyer said, and tried a smile.

Adele Gorman did not smile back. "Forget the ghosts," she said, "I was foolish to mention them. I should have known better." She took a deep breath, looked him squarely in the eye, and said, "I'm here to report the theft of a diamond brooch valued at six thousand dollars, and a pair of earrings worth thirty-five hundred dollars. Will you send a man to investigate tonight, or should I ask my father to get in touch with your superior officer?"

"Your father? What's he got to—"

"My father is a retired Surrogate's Court judge," Adele said.

"I see."

"Yes, I hope you do."

"What time did you say these ghosts arrive?" Meyer asked, and sighed heavily.

Between midnight and 2:00 the city does not change very much. The theaters have all let out, and the average Saturday night revelers, good citizens from Bethtown or Calm's Point, Riverhead or Majesta, have come into the Isola streets again in search of a snack or a giggle before heading home. The city is an ant's nest of after-theater eateries ranging from chic French cafés to pizzerias to luncheonettes to coffee

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shops to hot-dog stands to delicatessens, all of them packed to the ceilings because Saturday night is not only the loneliest night of the week, it is also the night to howl. And howl they do, these good burghers who have put in five long hard days of labor and who are anxious now to relax and enjoy themselves before Sunday arrives, bringing with it the attendant boredom of too much leisure time, anathema for the American male.

The crowds shove and jostle their way along The Stem, moving in and out of bowling alleys, shooting galleries, penny arcades, strip joints, night clubs, jazz emporiums, souvenir shops, lining the sidewalks outside plate-glass windows in which go-go girls gyrate, or watching with fascination as a roast beef slowly turns on a spit. Saturday night is a time for pleasure for the good people of Isola and environs, with nothing more on their minds than a little enjoyment of the short respite between Friday night at 5:00 and Monday morning at 9:00.

But along around 2:00 A.M. the city begins to change.

The good citizens have waited to get their cars out of parking garages (more garages than there are barber shops) or have staggered their way sleepily into subways to make the long trip back to the outlying sections, the furry toy dog won in the Pokerino palace clutched limply, the laughter a bit thin, the voice a bit croaked, a college song being sung on a rattling subway car, but without much force or spirit. Saturday night has ended, it is really Sunday morning already, and the morning hours are truly upon the city—and now the denizens appear.

The predators approach, with the attendant danger of the good citizens getting mugged and rolled. The junkies are out in force, looking for cars foolishly left unlocked and parked on the streets, or—lacking such fortuitious circumstance—experienced enough to force the side vent with a screwdriver, hook the lock button with a wire hanger, and open the door that way. There are pushers peddling their dream stuff, from pot to speed to hoss, a nickel bag or a twenty-dollar deck; fences hawking their stolen goodies, anything from a transistor radio to a refrigerator, the biggest bargain basement in town; burglars jimmying windows or forcing doors with a celluloid strip, this being an excellent hour to break into apartments, when the occupants are asleep and the street sounds are hushed.

But worse than any of these are the predators who roam the night in search of trouble. In cruising wedges of three or four, sometimes high but more often

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not, they look for victims—a taxicab driver coming out of a cafeteria, an old woman poking around garbage cans for hidden treasures, a teenage couple necking in a parked automobile—it doesn't matter. You can get killed in this city at any time of the day or night, but your chances for extinction are best after 2:00 A.M. because, paradoxically the night people take over in the morning. There are neighborhoods that terrify even cops in this lunar landscape, and there are certain places the cops will not enter unless they have first checked to see that there are two doors, one to get in by, and the other to get out through, fast, should someone decide to block the exit from behind.

The Painted Parasol was just such an establishment.

They had found in Mercy Howell's appointment book a notation that read: *Harry, 2:00 a.m. The Painted Parasol;* and since they knew this particular joint for exactly the kind of hole it was, and since they wondered what connection the slain girl might have had with the various unappetizing types who frequented the place from dusk till dawn, they decided to hit it and find out. The front entrance opened on a long flight of stairs that led down to the main room of what was not a restaurant, and not a club, though it combined features of both. It did not possess a liquor license, and so it served only coffee and sandwiches; but occasionally a rock singer would plug in his amplifier and guitar and whack out a few numbers for the patrons. The back door of the—hangout?—opened onto a sidestreet alley. Hawes checked it out, reported back to Carella, and they both made a mental floor plan just in case they needed it later.

Carella went down the long flight of steps first, Hawes immediately behind him. At the bottom of the stairway they moved through a beaded curtain and found themselves in a large room overhung with an old Air Force parachute painted in a wild psychedelic pattern. A counter on which rested a coffee urn and trays of sandwiches in Saran Wrap was just opposite the hanging beaded curtain. To the left and right of the counter were perhaps two dozen tables, all of them occupied. A waitress in a black leotard and black high-heeled patent-leather pumps was swiveling between and around the tables, taking orders.

There was a buzz of conversation in the room, hovering, captured in the folds of the brightly painted parachute. Behind the counter a man in a white apron was drawing a cup of coffee from the huge silver urn. Carella and Hawes walked over to him.

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Carella was almost six feet tall, and he weighed 180 pounds, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist and the hands of a street brawler. Hawes was six feet two inches tall, and he weighed 195 pounds bone-dry, and his hair was a fiery red with a white streak over the left temple where he had once been knifed while investigating a burglary. Both men looked like exactly what they were—fuzz.

"What's the trouble?" the man behind the counter asked immediately.

"No trouble," Carella said. "This your place?"

"Yeah. My name is Georgie Bright, and I already been visited, thanks. Twice."

"Oh? Who visited you?"

"First time a cop named O'Brien, second time a cop named Parker. I already cleared up that whole thing that was going on downstairs."

"What whole thing going on downstairs?"

"In the Men's Room. Some kids were selling pot down there, it got to be a regular neighborhood supermarket. So I done what O'Brien suggested, I put a man down there outside the toilet door, and the rule now is only one person goes in there at a time. Parker came around to make sure I was keeping my part of the bargain. I don't want no narcotics trouble here. Go down and take a look if you like. You'll see I got a man watching the toilet."

"Who's watching the man watching the toilet?" Carella asked.

"That ain't funny," Georgie Bright said, looking offended.

"Know anybody named Harry?" Hawes asked.

"Harry who? I know a lot of Harrys."

"Any of them here tonight?"

"Maybe."

"Where?"

"There's one over there near the bandstand. The big guy with the light hair."

"Harry what?"

"Donatello."

"Make the name?" Carella asked Hawes.

"No," Hawes said.

"Neither do I."

"Let's talk to him."

"You want a cup of coffee or something?" Georgie Bright asked.

"Yeah, why don't you send some over to the table?" Hawes said, and followed Carella across the room to where Harry Donatello was sitting with another man. Donatello was wearing gray slacks, black shoes and socks, a white shirt open at the throat, and a double-breasted blue blazer. His long blondish hair was combed straight back from the forehead, revealing a sharply defined widow's peak. He was easily as big as Hawes, and he sat with

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his hands folded on the table in front of him, talking to the man who sat opposite him. He did not look up as the detectives approached.

"Is your name Harry Donatello?" Carella asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"Police officers," Carella said, and flashed his shield.

"I'm Harry Donatello. What's the matter?"

"Mind if we sit down?" Hawes asked, and before Donatello could answer, both men sat, their backs to the empty bandstand and the exit door.

"Do you know a girl named Mercy Howell?" Carella asked.

"What about her?"

"Do you know her?"

"I know her. What's the beef? She underage or something?"

"When did you see her last?"

The man with Donatello, who up to now had been silent, suddenly piped, "You don't have to answer no questions without a lawyer, Harry. Tell them you want a lawyer."

The detectives looked him over. He was small and thin, with black hair combed sideways to conceal a receding hairline. He was badly in need of a shave. He was wearing blue trousers and a striped shirt.

"This is a field investigation," Hawes said drily, "and we can ask anything we damn please."

"Town's getting full of lawyers," Carella said. "What's *your* name, counselor?"

"Jerry Riggs. You going to drag *me* in this, whatever it is?"

"It's a few friendly questions in the middle of the night," Hawes said. "Anybody got any objections to that?"

"Getting so two guys can't even sit and talk together without getting shook down," Riggs said.

"You've got a rough life, all right," Hawes said, and the girl in the black leotard brought their coffee to the table, and then hurried off to take another order. Donatello watched her jiggling as she swiveled across the room.

"So when's the last time you saw the Howell girl?" Carella asked again.

"Wednesday night," Donatello said.

"Did you see her tonight?"

"No."

"Were you supposed to see her tonight?"

"Where'd you get that idea?"

"We're full of ideas," Hawes said.

"Yeah, I was supposed to meet her here ten minutes ago. Dumb broad is late, as usual."

"What do you do for a living, Donatello?"

"I'm an importer. You want to see my business card?"

"What do you import?"

"Souvenir ashtrays."

"How'd you get to know Mercy Howell?"

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"I met her at a party in The Quarter. She got a little high, and she done her thing."

"What thing?"

"The thing she does in that show she's in."

"Which is what?"

"She done this dance where she takes off all her clothes."

"How long have you been seeing her?"

"I met her a couple of months ago. I see her on and off, maybe once a week, something like that. This town is full of broads, you know—a guy don't have to get himself involved in no relationship with no specific broad."

"What was your relationship with *this* specific broad?"

"We have a few laughs together, that's all. She's a swinger, little Mercy," Donatello said, and grinned at Riggs.

"Want to tell us where you were tonight between eleven and twelve?"

"Is this still a *field* investigation?" Riggs asked sarcastically.

"Nobody's in custody yet," Hawes said, "so let's cut the legal jazz, okay? Tell us where you were, Donatello."

"Right here," Donatello said. "From ten o'clock till now."

"I suppose somebody saw you here during that time."

"A *hundred* people saw me."

A crowd of angry black men and women were standing outside the shattered window of the storefront church. Two fire engines and an ambulance were parked at the curb. Kling pulled in behind the second engine, some ten feet away from the hydrant. It was almost 2:30 A.M. on a bitterly cold October night, but the crowd looked and sounded like a mob at an afternoon street-corner rally in the middle of August. Restless, noisy, abrasive, anticipative, they ignored the penetrating cold and concentrated instead on the burning issue of the hour—the fact that a person or persons unknown had thrown a bomb through the plate-glass window of the church.

The beat patrolman, a newly appointed cop who felt vaguely uneasy in this neighborhood even during his daytime shift, greeted Kling effusively, his pale white face bracketed by earmuffs, his gloved hands clinging desperately to his nightstick. The crowd parted to let Kling through. It did not help that he was the youngest man on the squad, with the callow look of a country bumpkin on his unlined face; it did not help that he was blonde and hatless; it did not help that he walked *into* the church with the confident youthful stride of a champion come to set things right. The crowd knew he was fuzz, and they knew he was Whitey, and they knew, too, that if this bombing had taken place on Hall Avenue crosstown and

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downtown, the Police Commissioner himself would have arrived behind a herald of official trumpets.

This, however, was Culver Avenue, where a boiling mixture of Puerto Ricans and Blacks shared a disintegrating ghetto, and so the car that pulled to the curb was not marked with the Commissioner's distinctive blue-and-gold seal, but was instead a green Chevy convertible that belonged to Kling himself; and the man who stepped out of it looked young and inexperienced and inept despite the confident stride he affected as he walked into the church, his shield pinned to his overcoat.

The bomb had caused little fire damage, and the firemen already had the flames under control, their hoses snaking through and around the overturned folding chairs scattered around the small room. Ambulance attendants picked their way over the hoses and around the debris, carrying out the injured—the dead could wait.

"Have you called the Bomb Squad?" Kling asked the patrolman.

"No," the patrolman answered, shaken by the sudden possibility that he had been derelict in his duty.

"Why don't you do that now?" Kling suggested.

"Yes, sir," the patrolman answered, and rushed out. The ambulance attendants went by with a moaning woman on a stretcher. She was still wearing her eyeglasses, but one lens had been shattered and blood was running in a steady rivulet down the side of her nose. The place stank of gunpowder and smoke and charred wood. The most serious damage had been done at the rear of the small store, farthest away from the entrance door. Whoever had thrown the bomb must have possessed a good pitching arm to have hurled it so accurately through the window and across the fifteen feet to the makeshift altar.

The minister lay across his own altar, dead. Two women who had been sitting on folding chairs closest to the altar lay on the floor, tangled in death, their clothes still smoldering. The sounds of the injured filled the room, and then were suffocated by the overriding siren-shriek of the second ambulance arriving. Kling went outside to the crowd.

"Anybody here witness this?" he asked.

A young man, black, wearing a beard and a natural hair style, turned away from a group of other youths and walked directly to Kling.

"Is the minister dead?" he asked.

"Yes, he is," Kling answered.

"Who else?"

"Two women."

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"Who?"

"I don't know yet. We'll identify them as soon as the men are through in there." Kling turned again to the crowd. "Did anybody see what happened?" he asked.

"I saw it," the young man said.

"What's your name, son?"

"Andrew Jordan."

Kling took out his pad. "All right, let's have it."

"What good's this going to do?" Jordan asked. "Writing all this stuff in your book?"

"You said you saw what—"

"I saw it, all right. I was walking by, heading for the pool room up the street, and the ladies were inside singing, and this car pulled up, and a guy got out, threw the bomb, and ran back to the car."

"What kind of a car was it?"

"A red Volkswagen."

"What year?"

"Who can tell with those VWs?"

"How many people in it?"

"Two. The driver and the guy who threw the bomb."

"Notice the license-plate number?"

"No. They drove off too fast."

"Can you describe the man who threw the bomb?"

"Yeah. He was white."

"What else?" Kling asked.

"That's all," Jordan replied. "He was white."

There were perhaps three dozen estates in all of Smoke Rise, a hundred or so people living in luxurious near-seclusion on acres of valuable land through which ran four winding, interconnected, private roadways. Meyer Meyer drove between the wide stone pillars marking Smoke Rise's western access road, entering a city within a city, bounded on the north by the River Harb, shielded from the River Highway by stands of poplars and evergreens on the south—exclusive Smoke Rise, known familiarly and derisively to the rest of the city's inhabitants as "The Club."

MacArthur Lane was at the end of the road that curved past the Hamilton Bridge. Number 374 was a huge gray-stone house with a slate roof and scores of gables and chimneys jostling the sky, perched high in gloomy shadow above the Harb. As he stepped from the car, Meyer could hear the sounds of river traffic, the hooting of tugs, the blowing of whistles, the eruption of a squawk box on a destroyer midstream. He looked out over the water. Reflected lights glistened in shimmering liquid beauty—the hanging globes on the bridge's suspension cables, the dazzling reds and greens of signal lights on the opposite shore, single illuminated window slashes in apartment buildings throwing their mirror images onto the black surface of

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the river, the blinking wing lights of an airplane overhead moving in watery reflection like a submarine. The air was cold, and a fine piercing drizzle had begun several minutes ago.

Meyer shuddered, pulled the collar of his coat higher on his neck, and walked toward the old gray house, his shoes crunching on the driveway gravel, the sound echoing away into the high surrounding bushes.

The stones of the old house oozed wetness. Thick vines covered the walls, climbing to the gabled, turreted roof. He found a doorbell set over a brass escutcheon in the thick oak doorjamb, and pressed it. Chimes sounded somewhere deep inside the house. He waited.

The door opened suddenly.

The man looking out at him was perhaps 70 years old, with piercing blue eyes; he was bald except for white thatches of hair that sprang wildly from behind each ear. He wore a red smoking jacket and black trousers, a black ascot around his neck, and red velvet slippers.

"What do you want?" he asked immediately.

"I'm Detective Meyer of the Eighty-seventh—"

"Who sent for you?"

"A woman named Adele Gorman came to the—"

"My daughter's a fool," the man said. "We don't need the police here." And he slammed the door in Meyer's face.

The detective stood on the doorstep feeling somewhat like a horse's neck. A tugboat hooted on the river. A light snapped on upstairs, casting an amber rectangle into the dark driveway. He looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It was 2:35 A.M. The drizzle was cold and penetrating. He took out his handkerchief, blew his nose, and wondered what he should do next. He did not like ghosts, and he did not like lunatics, and he did not like nasty old men who did not comb their hair and who slammed doors in a person's face. He was about to head back for his car when the door opened again.

"Detective Meyer?" Adele Gorman said. "Do come in."

"Thank you," he said, and stepped into the entrance foyer.

"You're right on time."

"Well, a little early actually," Meyer said. He still felt foolish. What the hell was he doing in Smoke Rise investigating ghosts in the middle of the night?

"This way," Adele said, and he followed her through a somberly paneled foyer into a vast dimly lighted living room. Heavy oak beams ran overhead, velvet draperies hung at the window, the room was cluttered with ponderous old furniture. He could believe there were ghosts in this house, he could believe it.

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A young man wearing dark glasses rose like a specter from the sofa near the fireplace. His face, illuminated by the single standing floor lamp, looked wan and drawn. Wearing a black cardigan sweater over a white shirt and dark slacks, he approached Meyer unsmilingly with his hand extended—but he did not accept Meyer's hand when it was offered in return.

Meyer suddenly realized that the man was blind.

"I'm Ralph Gorman," he said, his hand still extended. "Adele's husband."

"How do you do, Mr. Gorman," Meyer said, and took his hand. The palm was moist and cold.

"It was good of you to come," Gorman said. "These apparitions have been driving us crazy."

"What time is it?" Adele asked suddenly, and looked at her watch. "We've got five minutes," she said. There was a tremor in her voice. She looked suddenly very frightened.

"Won't your father be here?" Meyer asked.

"No, he's gone up to bed," Adele said. "I'm afraid he's bored with the whole affair, and terribly angry that we notified the police."

Meyer made no comment. Had he know that Willem Van Houten, former Surrogate's Court judge, had not wanted the police to be notified, Meyer would not have been here either. He debated leaving now, but Adele Gorman had begun to talk again.

". . . is in her early thirties, I would guess. The other ghost, the male, is about your age—forty or forty-five, something like that."

"I'm thirty-seven," Meyer said.

"Oh."

"The bald head fools a lot of people."

"Yes."

"I was bald at a very early age."

"Anyway," Adele said, "their names are Elisabeth and Johann, and they've probably been—"

"Oh, they have names, do they?"

"Yes. They're ancestors, you know. My father is Dutch, and there actually were an Elisabeth and Johann Van Houten in the family centuries ago, when Smoke Rise was still a Dutch settlement."

"They're Dutch. Um-huh, I see," Meyer said.

"Yes. They always appear wearing Dutch costumes. And they also speak Dutch."

"Have you heard them, Mr. Gorman?"

"Yes," Gorman said. "I'm blind, you know—" he added, and hesitated, as though expecting some comment from Meyer. When none came, he said, "But I have heard them."

"Do you speak Dutch?"

"No. My father-in-law speaks it fluently, though, and he identi-

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fied the language for us, and told us what they were saying."

"What *did* they say?"

"Well, for one thing, they said they were going to steal Adele's jewelry, and they did just that."

"Your *wife's* jewelry? But I thought—"

"It was willed to her by her mother. My father-in-law keeps it in his safe."

"Kept, you mean."

"No, keeps. There are several pieces in addition to the ones that were stolen. Two rings and also a necklace."

"And the value?"

"Altogether? I would say about forty thousand dollars."

"Your ghosts have expensive taste."

The floor lamp in the room suddenly began to flicker. Meyer glanced at it and felt the hackles rising at the back of his neck.

"The lights are going out, Ralph," Adele whispered.

"Is it two forty-five?"

"Yes."

"They're here," Gorman whispered. "The ghosts are here."

Mercy Howell's roommate had been asleep for nearly four hours when they knocked on her door. But she was a wily young lady, hip to the ways of the big city, and very much awake as she conducted her own little investigation without so much as opening the door a crack. First she asked them to spell their names slowly. Then she asked them their shield numbers. Then she asked them to hold their shields and I.D. cards close to the door's peephole, where she could see them. Still unconvinced, she said through the locked door, "You just wait there a minute."

They waited for closer to five minutes before they heard her approaching the door again. The heavy steel bar of a Fox lock was lowered noisily to the floor, a safety chain rattled on its track, the tumblers of one lock clicked open, and then another, and finally the girl opened the door.

"Come in," she said, "I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I called the station house and they said you were okay."

"You're a very careful girl," Hawes said.

"At this hour of the morning? Are you kidding?" she said.

She was perhaps 25, with her red hair up in curlers, her face cold-creamed clean of makeup. She was wearing a pink quilted robe over flannel pajamas, and although she was probably a very pretty girl at 9:00 A.M., she now looked about as attractive as a Buffalo nickel.

"What's your name, Miss?" Carella asked.

"Lois Kaplan. What's this all about? Has there been another burglary in the building?"

"No, Miss Kaplan. We want to ask you some questions about

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Mercy Howell. Did she live here with you?"

"Yes," Lois said, and suddenly looked at them shrewdly. "What do you mean *did*? She still *does*."

They were standing in the small foyer of the apartment, and the foyer went so still that all the night sounds of the building were clearly audible all at once, as though they had not been there before but had only been summoned up now to fill the void of silence. A toilet flushed somewhere, a hot-water pipe rattled, a baby whimpered, a dog barked, someone dropped a shoe. In the foyer, now filled with noise, they stared at each other wordlessly, and finally Carella drew a deep breath and said, "Your roommate is dead. She was stabbed tonight as she was leaving the theater."

"No," Lois said, simply and flatly and unequivocably. "No, she isn't."

"Miss Kaplan—"

"I don't give a damn what you say, Mercy isn't dead."

"Miss Kaplan, she's dead."

"Oh, God," Lois said, and burst into tears.

The two men stood by feeling stupid and big and awkward and helpless. Lois Kaplan covered her face with her hands and sobbed into them, her shoulders heaving, saying over and over again, "I'm sorry, oh, God, please, I'm sorry, please, oh poor Mercy, oh my God," while the detectives tried not to watch.

At last the crying stopped and she looked up at them with eyes that had been knifed, and said softly, "Come in. Please," and led them into the living room. She kept staring at the floor as she talked. It was as if she could not look them in the face, not these men who had brought her the dreadful news.

"Do you know who did it?" she asked.

"No. Not yet."

"We wouldn't have wakened you in the middle of the night if—"

"That's all right."

"But very often, if we get moving on a case fast enough, before the trail gets cold—"

"Yes, I understand."

"We can often—"

"Yes, before the trail gets cold," Lois said.

"Yes."

The apartment went silent again.

"Would you know if Miss Howell had any enemies?" Carella asked.

"She was the sweetest girl in the world," Lois said.

"Did she argue with anyone recently? Were there any—"

"No."

"—any threatening telephone calls or letters?"

Lois Kaplan looked up at them.

"Yes," she said. "A letter."

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"A *threatening* letter?"

"We couldn't tell. It frightened Mercy, though. That's why she bought the gun."

"What kind of gun?"

"I don't know. A small one."

"Would it have been a .25 caliber Browning?"

"I don't know guns."

"Was this letter mailed to her, or delivered personally?"

"It was mailed to her. At the theater."

"When?"

"A week ago."

"Did she report it to the police?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Haven't you seen *Rattlesnake*?" Lois said.

"What do you mean?" Carella said.

"*Rattlesnake*. The musical. The show Mercy was in."

"No, I haven't."

"But you've heard of it."

"No."

"Where do you live, for God's sake? On the moon?"

"I'm sorry, I just haven't—"

"Forgive me," Lois said immediately. I'm not usually—I'm trying very hard to—I'm sorry. Forgive me."

"That's all right," Carella said.

"Anyway, it's a big hit now but—well there was trouble in the beginning, you see. Are you *sure* you don't know about this? It was in all the newspapers."

"Well, I guess I missed it," Carella said. "What was the trouble about?"

"Don't *you* know about this either?" she asked Hawes.

"No, I'm sorry."

"About Mercy's dance?"

"No."

"Well, in one scene Mercy danced the title song without any clothes on. Because the idea was to express—the hell with what the idea was. The point is that the dance wasn't at all obscene, it wasn't even sexy! But the police *missed* the point, and closed the show down two days after it opened. The producers had to go to court for a writ or something to get the show opened again."

"Yes, I remember it now," Carella said.

"What I'm trying to say is that nobody involved with *Rattlesnake* would report *anything* to the police. Not even a threatening letter."

"If she bought a pistol," Hawes said, "she would have *had* to go to the police. For a permit."

"She didn't have a permit."

"Then how'd she get the pistol? You can't buy a handgun without first—"

"A friend of hers sold it to her."

"What's the friend's name?"

"Harry Donatello."

"An importer," Carella said.

"Of souvenir ashtrays," Hawes said.

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"I don't know what he does for a living," Lois said, "but he got the gun for her."

"When was this?"

"A few days after she received the letter."

"What did the letter say?" Carella asked.

"I'll get it for you," Lois said, and went into the bedroom. They heard a dresser drawer opening, the rustle of clothes, what might have been a tin candy box being opened. Lois came back into the room. "Here it is," she said.

There didn't seem much point in trying to preserve latent prints on a letter that had already been handled by Mercy Howell, Lois Kaplan, and the Lord knew how many others. But nonetheless Carella accepted the letter on a handkerchief spread over the palm of his hand, and then looked at the face of the envelope. "She should have brought this to us immediately," he said. "It's written on hotel stationery, we've got an address without lifting a finger."

The letter had indeed been written on stationery from The Addison Hotel, one of the city's lesser-known fleabags, some two blocks north of the Eleventh Street Theater, where Mercy Howell had worked. There was a single sheet of paper in the envelope. Carella unfolded it. Lettered on the paper in pencil were the words:

PUT ON YOUR CLOSE, MISS!

The Avenging Angel.

The lamp went out, the room was black.

At first there was no sound but the sharp intake of Adele Gorman's breath. And then, indistinctly, as faintly as though carried on a swirling mist that blew in wetly from some desolated shore, there came the sound of garbled voices, and the room grew suddenly cold. The voices were those of a crowd in endless debate, rising and falling in cacaphonous cadence, a mixture of tongues that rattled and rasped. There was the sound, too, of a rising wind, as though a door to some forbidden landscape had been sharply and suddenly blown open to reveal a host of corpses incessantly pacing, involved in formless dialogue.

The voices rose in volume now, carried on that same chill penetrating wind, louder, closer, until they seemed to overwhelm the room, clamoring to be released from whatever unearthly vault contained them. And then, as if two of those disembodied voices had succeeded in breaking away from the mass of unseen dead, bringing with them a rush of bone-

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chilling air from some world unknown, there came a whisper at first, the whisper of a man's voice, saying the single word "Ralph!"—sharp-edged and with a distinctive foreign inflection.

"Ralph!"—and then a woman's voice joining it saying, "Adele!"—pronounced strangely and in the same cutting whisper.

"Adele!"—and then "Ralph!" again, the voices overlapping, unmistakably foreign, urgent, rising in volume until the whispers commingled to become an agonizing groan—and then the names were lost in the shrilling echo of the wind.

Meyer's eyes played tricks in the darkness. Apparitions that surely were not there seemed to float on the crescendo of sound that saturated the room. Barely perceived pieces of furniture assumed amorphous shapes as the male voice snarled and the female voice moaned above it.

And then the babel of other voices intruded again, as though calling these two back to whatever grim mossy crypt they had momentarily escaped. The sound of the wind became more fierce, and the voices of those numberless pacing dead receded, and echoed, and were gone.

The lamp sputtered back into dim illumination. The room seemed perceptibly warmer, but Meyer Meyer was covered with a cold clammy sweat.

"Now do you believe?" Adele Gorman asked.

Detective Bob O'Brien was coming out of the Men's Room down the hall when he saw the woman sitting on the bench just outside the squadroom. He almost went back into the toilet, but he was an instant too late; she had seen him, so there was no escape.

"Hello, Mr. O'Brien," she said, and performed an awkward little half-rising motion, as though uncertain whether she should stand to greet him or accept the deference due a lady. The clock on the squadroom wall read 3:02 A.M. but the lady was dressed as though for a brisk afternoon's hike in the park—brown slacks, low-heeled walking shoes, beige car coat, a scarf around her head. She was perhaps 55, with a face that once must have been pretty, save for the overlong nose. Green-eyed, with prominent cheekbones and a generous mouth, she executed her abortive rise, and then fell into step beside O'Brien as he walked into the squadroom.

"Little late in the night to be out, isn't it, Mrs. Blair?" O'Brien asked. He was not an insensitive cop, but his manner now was brusque and dismissive. Faced with Mrs. Blair for perhaps the seventeenth time in a month, he tried not to empathize with her loss because, truthfully, he was unable to assist her, and his

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inability to do so was frustrating.

"Have you seen her?" Mrs. Blair asked.

"No," O'Brien said. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Blair, but I haven't."

"I have a new picture—perhaps that will help."

"Yes, perhaps it will," he said.

The telephone was ringing. He lifted the receiver and said, "Eighty-seventh, O'Brien here."

"Bob, this's Bert Kling over on Culver—the church bombing."

"Yeah, Bert."

"Seems I remember seeing a red Volkswagen on that hot-car bulletin we got yesterday. You want to dig it out and let me know where it was snatched?"

"Yeah, just a second," O'Brien said, and began scanning the sheet on his desk.

"Here's the new picture," Mrs. Blair said. "I know you're very good with runaways, Mr. O'Brien—the kids all like you and give you information. If you see Penelope, all I want you to do is tell her I love her and am sorry for the misunderstanding."

"Yeah, I will," O'Brien said. Into the phone he said, "I've got two red VWs, Bert, a sixty-four and a sixty-six. You want them both?"

"Shoot," Kling said.

"The sixty-four was stolen from a guy named Art Hauser. It was parked outside eight-six-one West Meridian."

"And the sixty-six?"

"Owner is a woman named Alice Cleary. Car was stolen from a parking lot on Fourteenth."

"North or South?"

"South. Three-o-three South."

"Right. Thanks, Bob," Kling said, and hung up.

"And ask her to come home to me," Mrs. Blair said.

"Yes, I will," O'Brien said. "If I see her, I certainly will."

"That's a nice picture of Penny, don't you think?" Mrs. Blair asked. "It was taken last Easter. It's the most recent picture I have. I thought it would be helpful to you."

O'Brien looked at the girl in the picture, and then looked up into Mrs. Blair's green eyes, misted now with tears, and suddenly wanted to reach across the desk and pat her hand reassuringly, the one thing he could not do with any honesty. Because whereas it was true that he was the squad's runaway expert, with perhaps 50 snapshots of teenagers crammed into his bulging notebook, and whereas his record of finds was more impressive than any other cop's in the city, uniformed or plainclothes, there wasn't a damn thing he could do for the mother of Penelope Blair, who had run away from home last June.

"You understand—" he started to say.

"Let's not go into that again, Mr. O'Brien," she said, and rose.

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"Mrs. Blair—"

"I don't want to hear it," Mrs. Blair said, walking quickly out of the squadroom. "Tell her to come home. Tell her I love her," she said, and was gone down the iron-runged steps.

O'Brien sighed and stuffed the new picture of Penelope into his notebook. What Mrs. Blair did not choose to hear again was the fact that her runaway daughter Penny was 24 years old, and there was not a single agency on God's green earth, police or otherwise, that could force her to go home again if she did not choose to.

Fats Donner was a stool pigeon with a penchant for Turkish baths. A mountainous white Buddha of a man, he could usually be found at one of the city's steam emporiums at any given hour of the day, draped in a towel and reveling in the heat that saturated his flabby body. Bert Kling found him in an all-night place called Steam-Fit.

Kling sent the masseur into the steam room to tell Donner he was there, and Donner sent word out that he would be through in five minutes, unless Kling wished to join him. Kling did not wish to join him. He waited in the locker room, and in seven minutes' time, Donner came out, draped in his customary towel, a ludicrous sight at any time, but particularly at 3:30 A.M.

"Hey!" Donner said. "How you doing?"

"Fine," Kling said. "How about yourself?"

"Comme-ci, comme-ca," Donner said, and made a seesawing motion with one fleshy hand.

"I'm looking for some stolen heaps," Kling said, getting directly to the point.

"What kind?" Donner said.

"Volkswagens. A sixty-four and a sixty-six."

"What color?"

"Red."

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

"Where were they heisted?"

"One from in front of eight-six-one West Meridian. The other from a parking lot on South Fourteenth."

"When was this?"

"Both last week sometime. I don't have the exact dates."

"What do you want to know?"

"Who stole them."

"You think it's the same guy on both?"

"I don't know."

"What's so important about these heaps?"

"One of them may have been used in a bombing tonight."

"You mean the church over on Culver?"

"That's right."

"Count me out," Donner said.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a lot of guys in this town who're in *sympathy* with

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what happened over there tonight. I don't want to get involved."

"Who's going to know whether you're involved or not?" Kling asked.

"The same way *you* get information, they get information."

"I need your help, Donner."

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry on this one," Donner said, and shook his head.

"In that case I'd better hurry downtown to High Street."

"Why? You got another source down there?"

"No, that's where the D.A.'s office is."

Both men stared at each other—Donner in a white towel draped around his belly, sweat still pouring from his face and his chest even though he was no longer in the steam room, and Kling looking like a slightly tired advertising executive rather than a cop threatening a man with revelation of past deeds not entirely legal. They stared at each other with total understanding, caught in the curious symbiosis of law breaker and law enforcer, an empathy created by neither man, but essential to the existence of both. It was Donner who broke the silence.

"I don't like being coerced," he said.

"I don't like being refused," Kling answered.

"When do you need this?"

"I want to get going on it before morning."

"You expect miracles, don't you?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

"Miracles cost."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five if I turn up one heap, fifty if I turn up both."

"Turn them up first. We'll talk later."

"And if somebody breaks my head later?"

"You should have thought of that before you entered the profession," Kling said. "Come on, Donner, cut it out. This is a routine bombing by a couple of punks. You've got nothing to be afraid of."

"No?" Donner asked. And then, in a very professorial voice, he uttered perhaps the biggest understatement of the decade. "Racial tensions are running high in this city right now."

"Have you got my number at the squadroom?"

"Yeah, I've got it," Donner said glumly.

"I'm going back there now. Let me hear from you soon."

"You mind if I get dressed first?" Donner asked.

The night clerk at The Addison Hotel was alone in the lobby when Carella and Hawes walked in. Immersed in an open book on the desk in front of him, he did not look up as they approached. The lobby was furnished in faded

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Victorian: a threadbare Oriental rug, heavy curlicued mahogany tables, ponderous stuffed chairs with sagging bottoms and soiled antimacassars, two spittoons resting alongside each of two mahogany paneled supporting columns. A genuine Tiffany lampshade hung over the registration desk, one leaded glass panel gone, another badly cracked. In the old days The Addison had been a luxury hotel. It now wore its past splendor with all the style of a dance-hall girl in a moth-eaten mink she'd picked up in a thrift shop.

The clerk, in contrast to his antique surroundings, was a young man in his mid-twenties, wearing a neatly pressed brown tweed suit, a tan shirt, a gold and brown rep tie, and eyeglasses with tortoise-shell rims. He glanced up at the detectives belatedly, squinting after the intense concentration of peering at print, and then he got to his feet.

"Yes, gentlemen," he said. "May I help you?"

"Police officers," Carella said. He took his wallet from his pocket, and opened it to where his detective's shield was pinned to a leather flap.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Detective Carella, this is my partner, Detective Hawes."

"How do you do? I'm the night clerk—my name is Ronald Sanford."

"We're looking for someone who may have been registered here two weeks ago," Hawes said.

"Well, if he was registered here two weeks ago," Sanford said, "chances are he's still registered. Most of our guests are residents."

"Do you keep stationery in the lobby here?" Carella asked.

"Sir?"

"Stationery. Is there any place here in the lobby where someone could walk in off the street and pick up a piece of stationery?"

"No, sir. There's a writing desk there in the corner, near the staircase, but we don't stock it with stationery, no, sir."

"Is there stationery in the rooms?"

"Yes, sir."

"How about here at the desk?"

"Yes, of course, sir."

"Is there someone at this desk twenty-four hours a day?"

"Twenty-four hours a day, yes, sir. We have three shifts. Eight to four in the afternoon. Four to midnight. And midnight to eight A.M.

"You came on at midnight, did you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any guests come in after you started your shift?"

"A few, yes, sir."

"Notice anybody with blood on his clothes?"

"Blood? Oh, no, sir."

"Would you have noticed?"

"What do you mean?"

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"Are you generally pretty aware of what's going on around here?"

"I try to be, sir. At least, for most of the night. I catch a little nap when I'm not studying, but usually—"

"What do you study?"

"Accounting."

"Where?"

"At Ramsey U."

"Mind if we take a look at your register?"

"Not at all, sir."

He walked to the mail rack and took the hotel register from the counter there. Returning to the desk he opened it and said, "All of our present guests are residents, with the exception of Mr. Lambert in two hundred and four, and Mrs. Grant in seven hundred and one."

"When did they check in?"

"Mr. Lambert checked in—last night, I think it was. And Mrs. Grant has been here four days. She's leaving on Tuesday."

"Are these the actual signatures of your guests?"

"Yes, sir. All guests are asked to sign the register, as required by state law."

"Have you got that note, Cotton?" Carella asked, and then turned again to Sanford. "Would you mind if we took this over to the couch there?"

"Well, we're not supposed—"

"We can give you a receipt for it, if you like."

"No, I guess it'll be all right."

They carried the register to a couch upholstered in faded red velvet. With the book supported on Carella's lap they unfolded the note that Mercy Howell had received, and began to compare the signatures of the guests with the only part of the note that was not written in block letters—the words, *The Avenging Angel.*

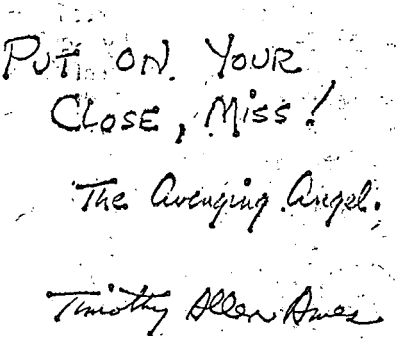
There were 52 guests in the hotel. Carella and Hawes went through the register once, and then started through it a second time.

"Hey," Hawes said suddenly.

"What?"

"Look at this one."

He took the note and placed it on the page so that it was directly above one of the signatures:



"What do you think?" he asked.

"Different handwriting," Carella said.

"Same initials," Hawes said.

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Detective Meyer Meyer was still shaken. He did not like ghosts. He did not like this house. He wanted to go home to his wife Sarah. He wanted her to stroke his hand and tell him that such things did not exist, there was nothing to be afraid of, a grown man? How could he believe in poltergeists, shades, Dutch spirits? Ridiculous!

But he had heard them, and he had felt their chilling presence, and had almost thought he'd seen them, if only for an instant. He turned with fresh shock now toward the hall staircase and the sound of descending footsteps. Eyes wide, he waited for whatever new manifestation might present itself. He was tempted to draw his revolver, but he was afraid such an act would appear foolish to the Gormans. He had come here a skeptic, and he was now at least *willing* to believe, and he waited in dread for whatever was coming down those steps with such ponderous footfalls—some ghoul trailing winding sheets and rattling chains? Some specter with a bleached skull for a head and long bony clutching fingers dripping the blood of babies?

Willem Van Houten, wearing his red velvet slippers and his red smoking jacket, his hair still jutting wildly from behind each ear, his blue eyes fierce and snapping, came into the living room and walked directly to where his daughter and son-in-law were sitting.

"Well?" he asked. "Did they come again?"

"Yes, Daddy," Adele said.

"What did they want this time?"

"I don't know. They spoke Dutch again."

Van Houten turned to Meyer. "Did *you* see them?" he asked.

"No, sir, I did not," Meyer said.

"But they were *here*," Gorman protested, and turned his blank face to his wife. "I heard them."

"Yes, darling," Adele assured him. "We *all* heard them. But it was like that other time, don't you remember? When we could hear them even though they couldn't quite break through."

"Yes, that's right," Gorman said, and nodded. "This happened once before, Detective Meyer." He was facing Meyer now, his head tilted quizzically, the sightless eyes covered with their black glasses. When he spoke his voice was like that of a child seeking reassurance. "But you *did* hear them, didn't you, Detective Meyer?"

"Yes," Meyer said. "I heard them, Mr. Gorman."

"And the wind?"

"Yes, the wind, too."

"And felt them. It—it gets so cold when they appear. You did feel their presence, didn't you?"

"I felt something," Meyer said.

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Van Houten suddenly asked, "Are you satisfied?"

"About what?" Meyer said.

"That there are ghosts in this house? That's why you're here, isn't it? To ascertain—"

"He's here because I asked Adele to notify the police," Gorman said.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because of the stolen jewelry," Gorman said. "And because—" He paused. "Because I've lost my sight, yes, but I wanted to—to make sure I wasn't losing my mind as well."

"You're perfectly sane, Ralph," Van Houten said.

"About the jewelry—" Meyer said.

"*They* took it," Van Houten said.

"Who?"

"Johann and Elisabeth. Our friendly neighborhood ghosts."

"That's impossible, Mr. Van Houten."

"Why is it impossible?"

"Because ghosts—" Meyer started, and hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Ghosts—well, ghosts don't go around stealing jewelry. I mean, what use would they have for it?" he said lamely, and looked at the Gorman for corroboration. Neither of the Gormans seemed to be in a substantiating mood. They sat on the sofa near the fireplace, both looking glum.

"They want us out of this house," Van Houten said. "It's as simple as that."

"How do you know?"

"Because they said so."

"When?"

"Before they stole the necklace and the earrings."

"They told this to you?"

"To me and to my children. All three of us were here."

"But I understand the ghosts speak only Dutch."

"Yes, I translated for Ralph and Adele."

"And then what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"When did you discover the jewelry was missing?"

"The instant they were gone."

"You mean you went to the safe?"

"Yes, and opened it, and the jewelry was gone."

"We had put it in the safe not ten minutes before that," Adele said. "We'd been to a party, Ralph and I, and we got home very late, and Daddy was still awake, reading, sitting in that chair you're in this very minute. I asked him to open the safe, and he did, and he put the jewelry in and closed the safe and . . . and then *they* came and . . . and made their threats."

"What time was this?"

"The usual time. The time they always come. Two forty-five in the morning."

"And you say the jewelry was put into the safe at what time?"

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"About two-thirty," Gorman said.

"And when was the safe opened again?"

"Immediately after they left. They only stay a few moments. This time they told my father-in-law they were taking the necklace and the earrings with them. He rushed to the safe as soon as the lights came on again—"

"Do the lights always go off?"

"Always," Adele said. "It's always the same. The lights go off, and the room gets very cold, and we hear these strange voices arguing." She paused. "And then Johann and Elisabeth come."

"Except that this time they didn't come," Meyer said.

"And one other time," Adele said quickly.

"They want us out of this house," Van Houten said, "that's all there is to it. Maybe we ought to leave. Before they take *everything* from us."

"Everything? What do you mean?"

"The rest of my daughter's jewelry. And some stock certificates. Everything that's in the safe."

"Where *is* the safe?" Meyer asked.

"Here. Behind this painting." Van Houten walked to the wall opposite the fireplace. An oil painting of a pastoral landscape hung there in an ornate gilt frame. The frame was hinged to the wall. Van Houten swung the painting out as though opening a door, and revealed the small, round, black safe behind it. "Here."

"How many people know the combination?" Meyer asked.

"Just me," Van Houten said.

"Do you keep the number written down anywhere?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Hidden."

"Where?"

"I hardly think that's any of your business, Detective Meyer."

"I'm only trying to find out whether some other person could have got hold of the combination somehow."

"Yes, I suppose that's possible," Van Houten said. "But highly unlikely."

"Well," Meyer said, and shrugged. "I don't really know what to say. I'd like to measure the room, if you don't mind, get the dimensions, placement of doors and windows, things like that. For my report." He shrugged again.

"It's rather late, isn't it?" Van Houten said.

"Well, I *got* here rather late," Meyer said, and smiled.

"Come, Daddy, I'll make us all some tea in the kitchen," Adele said. "Will you be long, Detective Meyer?"

"It may take a while."

"Shall I bring you some tea?"

"Thank you, that would be nice."

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She rose from the couch and then guided her husband's hand to her arm. Walking slowly beside him, she led him past her father and out of the room. Van Houten looked at Meyer once again, nodded briefly, and followed them out. Meyer closed the door behind them and immediately walked to the standing floor lamp.

The woman was 60 years old, and she looked like anybody's grandmother, except that she had just murdered her husband and three children. They had explained her rights to her, and she had told them she had nothing to hide and would answer any questions they asked her. She sat in a straight-backed squadroom chair, wearing a black cloth coat over blood-stained nightgown and robe, her handcuffed hands in her lap, her hands unmoving on her black leather pocketbook.

O'Brien and Kling looked at the police stenographer, who glanced up at the wall clock, noted the time of the interrogation's start as 3:55 A.M., and then signaled that he was ready whenever they were.

"What is your name?" O'Brien asked.

"Isabel Martin."

"How old are you, Mrs. Martin?"

"Sixty."

"Where do you live?"

"On Ainsley Avenue."

"Where on Ainsley?"

"Six hundred fifty-seven Ainsley."

"With whom do you live there?"

"With my husband Roger, and my son Peter, and my daughters Anne and Abigail."

"Would you like to tell us what happened tonight, Mrs. Martin?" Kling asked.

"I killed them all," she said. She had white hair, a fine aquiline nose, brown eyes behind rimless spectacles. She stared straight ahead of her as she spoke, looking neither to her right nor to her left, seemingly alone with the memory of what she had done not a half hour before.

"Can you give us some of the details, Mrs. Martin?"

"I killed *him* first."

"Who do you mean, Mrs. Martin?"

"My husband."

"When was this?"

"When he came home."

"What time was that, do you remember?"

"A little while ago."

"It's almost four o'clock now," Kling said. "Would you say this was at, what, three thirty or thereabouts?"

"I didn't look at the clock," she said. "I heard his key in the door, and I went in the kitchen, and there he was."

"Yes?"

"There's a meat cleaver I keep

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on the sink. I hit him with it."

"Why did you do that, Mrs. Martin?"

"Because I wanted to."

"Were you arguing with him, is that it?"

"No. I just went over to the sink and picked up the cleaver, and then I hit him with it."

"Where did you hit him, Mrs. Martin?"

"On his head and on his neck and I think on his shoulder."

"You hit him three times with the cleaver?"

"I hit him a lot of times. I don't know how many."

"Were you aware that you were hitting him?"

"Yes, I was aware."

"You knew you were striking him with a cleaver."

"Yes, I knew."

"Did you intend to kill him with the cleaver?"

"I intended to kill him with the cleaver."

"And afterwards, did you know you had killed him?"

"I knew he was dead, yes."

"What did you do then?"

"My oldest child came into the kitchen. Peter. My son. He yelled at me, he wanted to know what I'd done, he kept yelling at me and yelling at me. I hit him too—to get him to shut up. I hit him only once, across the throat."

"Did you know what you were doing at the time?"

"I knew what I was doing. He was *another* one, that Peter."

"What happened next, Mrs. Martin?"

"I went in the back bedroom where the two girls sleep, and I hit Annie with the cleaver first, and then I hit Abigail."

"Where did you hit them, Mrs. Martin?"

"On the face. Their faces."

"How many times?"

"I think I hit Annie twice, and Abigail only once."

"Why did you do that, Mrs. Martin?"

"Who would take care of them after I was gone?" Mrs. Martin asked of no one.

There was a long pause, then Kling asked, "Is there anything else you want to tell us?"

"There's nothing more to tell. I done the right thing."

The detectives walked away from the desk. They were both pale. "Man," O'Brien whispered.

"Yeah," Kling said. "We'd better call the night D.A. right away, get him to take a full confession from her."

"Killed four of them without batting an eyelash," O'Brien said, and shook his head, and went back to where the stenographer was, typing up Mrs. Martin's statement.

The telephone was r i n g i n g. Kling walked to the nearest desk and lifted the receiver. "Eighty seventh, Detective Kling," he said.

"This is Donner."

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"Yeah, Fats."

"I think I got a lead on one of those heaps."

"Shoot."

"This would be the one heisted on Fourteenth Street. According to the dope I've got it happened yesterday morning. Does that check out?"

"I'll have to look at the bulletin again. Go ahead, Fats."

"It's already been ditched," Donner said. "If you're looking for it try outside the electric company on the River Road."

"Thanks, I'll make a note of that. Who stole it, Fats?"

"This is strictly *entre nous,*" Donner said. "I don't want *no* tie-in with it *never.* The guy who done it is a mean little guy—rip out his mother's heart for a dime. He hates blacks, killed one in a street rumble a few years ago, and managed to beat the rap. I think maybe some officer was on the take, huh, Kling?"

"You can't square homicide in this city, and you know it, Fats."

"Yeah? I'm surprised. You can square damn near anything else for a couple of bills."

"What's his name?"

"Danny Ryder. Three-five-four-one Grover Avenue. You won't find him there now, though."

"Where *will* I find him now?"

"Ten minutes ago he was in an all-night bar on Mason, place called Felicia's. You going in after him?"

"I am."

"Take your gun," Donner said.

There were seven people in Felicia's when Kling got there at 4:45. He cased the bar through the plate-glass window fronting the place, unbuttoned the third button of his overcoat, reached in to clutch the butt of his revolver, worked it out of the holster once and then back again, and went in through the front door.

There was the immediate smell of stale cigarette smoke and beer and sweat and cheap perfume. A Puerto Rican girl was in whispered consultation with a sailor in one of the leatherette-lined booths. Another sailor was hunched over the juke box, thoughtfully considering his next selection, his face tinted orange and red and green from the colored tubing. A tired, fat, 50-year old blonde sat at the far end of the bar, watching the sailor as though the next button he pushed might destroy the entire world. The bartender was polishing glasses. He looked up when Kling walked in and immediately smelled the law.

Two men were seated at the opposite end of the bar.

One of them was wearing a blue turtleneck sweater, gray slacks, and desert boots. His brown hair was clipped close to his scalp in a military cut. The

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other man was wearing a bright orange team jacket, almost luminous, with the words *Orioles, S.A.C.* lettered across its back. The one with the crewcut said something softly, and the other one chuckled. Behind the bar a glass clinked as the bartender replaced it on the shelf. The juke box erupted in sound, Jimi Hendrix rendering *All Along the Watchtower.*

Kling walked over to the two men.

"Which one of you is Danny Ryder?" he asked.

The one with the short hair said, "Who wants to know?"

"Police officer," Kling said, and the one in the orange jacket whirled with a pistol in his hand. Kling's eyes opened wide in surprise, and the pistol went off.

There was no time to think, there was hardly time to breathe. The explosion of the pistol was shockingly close, the acrid stink of cordite was in Kling's nostrils. The knowledge that he was still alive, the sweet rushing clean awareness that the bullet had somehow missed him was only a fleeting click of intelligence accompanying what was essentially a reflexive act.

Kling's .38 came free of its holster, his finger was inside the trigger guard and around the trigger, he squeezed off his shot almost before the gun had cleared the flap of his overcoat, fired into the orange jacket and threw his shoulder simultaneously against the chest of the man with the short hair, knocking him backward off his stool. The man in the orange jacket, his face twisted in pain, was leveling the pistol for another shot.

Kling fired again, squeezing the trigger without thought of rancor, and then whirled on the man with the short hair, who was crouched on the floor against the bar.

"Get up!" he yelled.

"Don't shoot!"

"Get *up*!"

He yanked the man to his feet, hurled him against the bar, thrust the muzzle of his pistol at the blue turtleneck sweater, ran his hands under the armpits and between the legs, while the man kept saying over and over again "Don't shoot, please don't shoot."

He backed away from him and leaned over the one in the orange jacket.

"Is this Ryder?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Who're you?"

"Frank Pasquale. Look, I—"

"Shut up, Frank," Kling said. "Put your hands behind your back. Move!"

He had already taken his handcuffs from his belt. He snapped them onto Pasquale's wrists, and only then became aware that Jimi Hendrix was still singing, the sailors were watching with pale white faces, the Puerto Rican girl

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was screaming, the fat faded blonde had her mouth open, the bartender was frozen in mid-motion, the tip of his bar towel inside a glass.

"All right," Kling said. He was breathing harshly. "All right," he said again, and wiped his forehead.

Timothy Allen Ames was a potbellied man of 40, with a thick black mustache, a mane of long black hair, and brown eyes sharply alert at 5:05 in the morning. He answered the door as though he'd been already awake, asked for identification, then asked the detectives to wait a moment, closed the door, and came back shortly afterward, wearing a robe over his striped pajamas.

"Is your name Timothy Ames?" Carella asked.

"That's me," Ames said. "Little late to be paying a visit, ain't it?"

"Or early, depending how you look at it," Hawes said.

"One thing I can do without at five A.M. is humorous cops," Ames said. "How'd you get up here, anyway? Is that little jerk asleep at the desk again?"

"Who do you mean?" Carella asked.

"Lonnie Sanford, or whatever his name is."

"Ronald—Ronnie Sanford."

"Yeah, him. Always giving me trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"About broads," Ames said. "Acts like he's running a nunnery here, can't stand to see a guy come in with a girl. I notice he ain't got no compunctions about letting *cops* upstairs, though, no matter *what* time it is."

"Never mind Sanford, let's talk about you," Carella said.

"Sure, what would you like to know?"

"Where were you between eleven twenty and twelve tonight?"

"Right here."

"Can you prove it?"

"Sure. I got back here about eleven o'clock, and I been here ever since. Ask Sanford downstairs—no, he wasn't on yet. He don't come on till midnight."

"Who *else* can we ask, Ames?"

"Listen, you going to make trouble for me?"

"Only if you're in trouble."

"I got a broad here. She's over eighteen, don't worry. But, like, she's a junkie, you know? But I know you guys, and if you want to make trouble—"

"Where is she?"

"In the john."

"Get her out here."

"Look, do me a favor, will you? Don't bust the kid. She's trying to kick the habit, she really is. I been helping her along."

"How?"

"By keeping her busy," Ames said, and winked.

"Call her."

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"Bea, come out here!" Ames shouted.

There were a few moments of hesitation, then the bathroom door opened. The girl was a tall plain brunette wearing a short terrycloth robe. She sidled into the room cautiously, as though expecting to be struck in the face at any moment. Her brown eyes were wide with expectancy. She knew fuzz, she knew what it was like to be arrested on a narcotics charge, and she had listened to the conversation from behind the closed bathroom door; and now she waited for whatever was coming, expecting the worst.

"What's your name, Miss?" Hawes asked.

"Beatrice Norden."

"What time did you get here tonight, Beatrice?"

"About eleven."

"Was this man with you?"

"Yes."

"Did he leave here at any time tonight?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. He picked me up about nine o'clock—"

"Where do you live, Beatrice?"

"Well, that's the thing, you see," the girl said. "I been put out of my room."

"So where'd he pick you up?"

"At my girl friend's house. You can ask her, she was there when he came. Her name is Rosalie Dawes. Anyway, Timmy picked me up at nine, and we went out to eat, and we came up here around eleven."

"I hope you're telling us the truth, Miss Norden," Carella said.

"I swear to God, we been here all night," Beatrice answered.

"All right, Ames," Hawes said, "we'd like a sample of your handwriting."

"My *what*?"

"Your handwriting."

"What for?"

"We collect autographs," Carella said.

"Gee, these guys really break me up," Ames said to the girl. "Regular night-club comics we get in the middle of the night."

Carella handed him a pencil and then tore a sheet from his pad. "You want to write this for me?" he said. "The first part's in block lettering."

"What the hell is block lettering?" Ames asked.

"He means *print* it," Hawes said.

"Then why didn't he say so?"

"Put on your clothes, Miss," Carella said.

"What for?" Beatrice said.

"That's what I want him to write," Carella explained.

"Oh."

"Put on your clothes, Miss," Ames repeated, and lettered it onto the sheet of paper. "What else?" he asked, looking up.

"Now sign it in your own handwriting with the following

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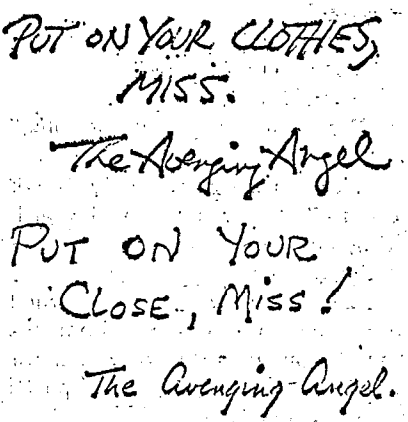
words: The Avenging Angel."

"What the hell is this supposed to be?" Ames asked.

"You want to write it, please?"

Ames wrote the words, then handed the slip of paper to Carella. He and Hawes compared it with the note that had been mailed to Mercy Howell:



"So?" Ames asked.

"So you're clean," Hawes said.

At the desk downstairs, Ronnie Sanford was still immersed in his accounting textbook. He got to his feet again as the detectives came out of the elevator, adjusted his glasses on his nose, and said, "Any luck?"

"Afraid not," Carella answered. "We're going to need this register for a while, if that's okay."

"Well—"

"Give him a receipt for it, Cotton," Carella said. It was late, and he didn't want a debate in the lobby of a rundown hotel. Hawes quickly made out a receipt in duplicate, signed both copies, and handed one to Sanford.

"What about this torn cover?" Hawes asked belatedly.

"Yeah," Carella said. There was a small rip on the leather binding of the book. He fingered it briefly now, then said, "Better note that on the receipt, Cotton." Hawes took back the receipt and, on both copies, jotted the words Small rip on front cover. He handed the receipts back to Sanford.

"Want to just sign these, Mr. Sanford?" he said.

"What for?" Sanford asked.

"To indicate we received the register in this condition."

"Oh, sure," Sanford said. He picked up a ballpoint pen from its desk holder, and asked, "What do you want me to write?"

"Your name and your title that's all."

"My title?"

"Night Clerk, The Addison Hotel."

"Oh, sure," Sanford said, and signed both receipts. "This okay?" he asked. The detectives looked at what he had written.

"You like girls?" Carella asked suddenly.

"What?" Sanford asked.

"Girls," Hawes said.

"Sure. Sure, I like girls."

"Dressed or naked?"

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"What?"

"With clothes or without?"

"I—I don't know what you mean, sir."

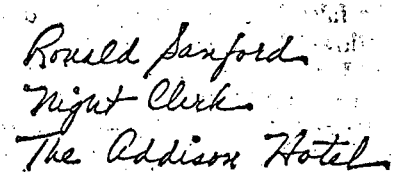
"Where were you tonight between eleven twenty and midnight?" Hawes asked.

"Getting—getting ready to come to—to work," Sanford said.

"You sure you weren't in the alley of the Eleventh Street Theater stabbing a girl named Mercy Howell?"

"What? No—no, of course not. I was—I was home—getting dressed—" Sanford took a deep breath and decided to get indignant. "Listen, what's this all about?" he said. "Would you mind telling me?"

"It's all about this," Carella said, and turned one of the receipts so that Sanford could read the signature:



"Get your hat," Hawes said. "Study hall's over."

It was 5:25 when Adele Gorman came into the room with Meyer's cup of tea. He was crouched near the air-conditioning unit recessed into the wall to the left of the drapes; he glanced up when he heard her, then rose.

"I didn't know what you took," she said, "so I brought everything."

"Thank you," he said. "Just a little sugar is fine."

"Have you measured the room?" she asked, and put the tray down on the table in front of the sofa.

"Yes, I think I have everything I need now," Meyer said. He put a spoonful of sugar into the tea, stirred it, then lifted the cup to his mouth. "Hot," he said.

Adele Gorman was watching him silently. She said nothing. He kept sipping his tea. The ornate clock on the mantelpiece ticked in a swift whispering tempo.

"Do you always keep this room so dim?" Meyer asked.

"Well, my husband is blind, you know," Adele said. "There's really no need for brighter light."

"Mmm. But your father reads in this room, doesn't he?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"The night you came home from that party. He was sitting in the chair over there near the floor lamp. Reading. Remember?"

"Oh. Yes, he was."

"Bad light to read by."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

"I think maybe those bulbs are defective," Meyer said.

"Do you think so?"

"Mmm. I happened to look at the lamp, and there are three one-hundred-watt bulbs in it, all of them burning. You should be get-

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ting a lot more light with that much wattage."

"Well, I really don't know about such—"

"Unless the lamp is on a rheostat, of course."

"I'm afraid I don't even know what a rheostat is."

"It's an adjustable resistor. You can dim your lights or make them brighter with it. I thought maybe the lamp was on a rheostat, but I couldn't find a control knob anywhere in the room." Meyer paused. "You wouldn't know if there's a rheostat control in the house, would you?"

"I'm sure there isn't," Adele said.

"Must be defective bulbs then," Meyer said, and smiled. "Also, I think your air conditioner is broken."

"No, I'm sure it isn't."

"Well, I was just looking at it, and all the switches are turned to the 'On' position, but it isn't working. So I guess it's broken. That's a shame, too, because it's such a nice unit. Sixteen thousand BTUs. That's a lot of cooling power for a room this size. We've got one of those big old price-fixed apartments on Concord, my wife and I, with a large bedroom, and we get adequate cooling from a half-ton unit. It's a shame this one is broken."

"Yes. Detective Meyer, I don't wish to appear rude, but it is late—"

"Sure," Meyer said. "Unless, of course, the air conditioner's on a remote switch, too. So that all you have to do is turn a knob in another part of the house and it comes on." He paused. "*Is* there such a switch somewhere, Mrs. Gorman?"

"I have no idea."

"I'll just finish my tea and run along," Meyer said. He lifted the cup to his lips, sipped the tea, glanced at her over the rim, took the cup away from his mouth, and said, "But I'll be back."

"I hardly think there's any need for that," Adele said.

"Well, some jewelry's b e e n stolen—"

"The ghosts—"

"Come off it, Mrs. Gorman."

The room went silent.

"Where are the loudspeakers, Mrs. Gorman?" Meyer asked. "In the false beams up there? They're hollow—I checked them out."

"I think perhaps you'd better leave," Adele said slowly.

"Sure," Meyer said. He put the teacup down, sighed, and got to his feet.

"I'll show you out," Adele said.

They walked to the front door and out into the driveway. The night was still. The drizzle had stopped, and a thin layer of frost covered the grass rolling away toward the river below. Their footsteps crunched on the gravel as they walked slowly toward the automobile.

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"My husband was blinded four years ago," Adele said abruptly. "He's a chemical engineer, there was an explosion at the plant, he could have been killed. Instead, he was only blinded." She hesitated an instant, then said again, "Only blinded," and there was such a sudden cry of despair in those two words that Meyer wanted to put his arm around her, console her the way he might his daughter, tell her that everything would be all right come morning, the night was almost done, and morning was on the horizon.

But instead he leaned on the fender of his car, and she stood beside him looking down at the driveway gravel, her eyes not meeting his. They could have been conspirators exchanging secrets in the night, but they were only two people who had been thrown together on a premise as flimsy as the ghosts that inhabited this house.

"He gets a disability pension from the company," Adele said, "they've really been quite kind to us. And, of course, I work. I teach school, Detective Meyer. Kindergarten. I love children." She paused. She would not raise her eyes to meet his. "But—it's sometimes very difficult. My father, you see—"

Meyer waited. He longed suddenly for dawn, but he waited patiently, and heard her catch her breath as though committed to go ahead now however painful the revelation might be, compelled to throw herself on the mercy of the night before the morning sun broke through.

"My father's been retired for fifteen years." She took a deep breath, and then said, "He gambles, Detective Meyer. He's a horse player. He loses large sums of money."

"Is that why he stole your jewels?" Meyer asked.

"You know, don't you?" Adele said simply, and raised her eyes to his. "Of course you know. It's quite transparent, his ruse, a shoddy little show really, a performance that would fool no one but—no one but a blind man." She brushed at her cheek; he could not tell whether the cold air had caused her sudden tears. "I really don't care about the theft; the jewels were left to me by my mother, and after all it was my father who bought them for her, so it's—it's really like returning a legacy. I really don't care about that part of it. I'd have *given* the jewelry to him if only he'd asked, but he's so proud, such a proud man. A proud man who—who steals from me and pretends that ghosts are committing the crime.

"And my husband, in his dark universe, listens to the sounds my father puts on tape and visualizes things he cannot quite believe and

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so he asks me to notify the police because he needs an impartial observer to contradict the suspicion that someone is stealing pennies from his blind man's cup. That's why I came to you, Detective Meyer. So that you would arrive here tonight and perhaps be fooled as I was fooled at first, and perhaps say to my husband, 'Yes, Mr. Gorman, there *are* ghosts in your house.' "

She suddenly placed her hand on his sleeve. The tears were streaming down her face, she had difficulty catching her breath. "Because you see, Detective Meyer, there *are* ghosts in this house, there really and truly are. The ghost of a proud man who was once a brilliant judge and who is now a gambler and a thief; and the ghost of a man who once could see, and who now trips and falls in the darkness."

On the river a tugboat hooted. Adele Gorman fell silent. Meyer opened the door of his car and got in behind the wheel.

"I'll call your husband tomorrow," he said abruptly and gruffly. "Tell him I'm convinced something supernatural is happening here."

"And will you be back, Detective Meyer?"

"No," he said. "I won't be back, Mrs. Gorman."

In the squadroom they were wrapping up the night. Their day had begun at 7:45 P.M. yesterday, and they had been officially relieved at 5:45 A.M.; but they had not left the office yet because there were questions still to be asked, reports to be typed, odds and ends to be put in place before they could go home. And since the relieving detectives were busy getting *their* approaching workday organized, the squadroom at 6:00 A.M. was busier than it might have been on any given afternoon, with two teams of cops getting in each others' way.

In the Interrogation Room, Carella and Hawes were questioning young Ronald Sanford in the presence of the Assistant District Attorney who had come over earlier to take Mrs. Martin's confession, and who now found himself listening to another one when all he wanted to do was go home to sleep. Sanford seemed terribly shocked that they had been able to notice the identical handwriting in *The Addison Hotel* and *The Avenging Angel*—he couldn't get over it. He thought he had been very clever in misspelling the word "clothes," because then they would think some illiterate had written it, not someone who was studying to be an accountant.

He could not explain why he had killed Mercy Howell. He got all mixed up when he tried to explain that. It had something to do with the moral climate of

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America, and people exposing themselves in public, people like that shouldn't be allowed to pollute others, to foist their filth on others, to intrude on the privacy of others who only wanted to make a place for themselves in the world, who were trying so very hard to make something of themselves, studying accounting by day and working in a hotel by night, what right had these other people to ruin it for everybody else?

Frank Pasquale's tune, sung in the Clerical Office to Kling and O'Brien, was not quite so hysterical, but similar to Sanford's nonetheless. He had got the idea together with Danny Ryder. They had decided between them that the blacks in America were taking jobs away from decent hard-working people who only wanted to be left alone, what right did they have to force themselves on everybody else? So they had decided to bomb the church, just to show them they couldn't get away with it, not in America. He didn't seem terribly concerned over the fact that his partner was lying stone-cold dead on a slab at the morgue, or that their little Culver Avenue expedition had cost three people their lives, and had severely injured a half dozen others. All he wanted to know, repeatedly, was whether his picture would be in the newspaper.

At his desk Meyer Meyer started to type up a report on the Gorman ghosts, then decided the hell with it. If the lieutenant asked him where he'd been half the night, he would say he had been out looking for trouble in the streets. The Lord knew there was enough of *that* around, any night. He pulled the report forms and their separating sheets of carbon paper from the ancient typewriter, and noticed that Detective Hal Willis was pacing the room anxiously, waiting to get at the desk the moment he vacated it.

"Okay, Hal," he said, "it's all yours."

"Finalmente!" Willis, who was not Italian, said.

The telephone rang.

The sun was up when they came out of the building and walked past the hanging green "87" globes and down the low flat steps to the sidewalk. The park across the street shimmered with early-morning autumn brilliance, the sky above it was clear and blue. It was going to be a beautiful day.

They walked toward the diner on the next block, Meyer and O'Brien ahead of the others, Carella, Hawes, and Kling bringing up the rear. They were tired, and exhaustion showed in their eyes, in the set of their mouths, in the pace they kept. They talked without animation,

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mostly about their work, their breaths feathery and white on the cold morning air.

When they reached the diner, they took off their overcoats and ordered hot coffee and cheese Danish and toasted English muffins. Meyer said he thought he was coming down with a cold. Carella told him about some cough medicine his wife had given one of the children. O'Brien, munching on a muffin, glanced across the diner and saw a young girl in one of the booths. She was wearing blue jeans and a bright colored Mexican serape, and she was talking to a boy wearing a Navy pea jacket.

"I think I see somebody," he said, and he moved out of the booth past Kling and Hawes, who were talking about the newest regulation on search and seizure.

The girl looked up when he approached the booth.

"Miss Blair?" he said. "Penelope Blair?"

"Yes," the girl answered. "Who are you?"

"Detective O'Brien," he said, "Eighty-seventh Precinct. Your mother was in last night, Penny. She asked me to tell you—"

"Flake off, cop," Penelope Blair said. "Go stop a riot somewhere."

O'Brien looked at her silently for a moment. Then he nodded, turned away, and went back to the table.

"Anything?" Kling asked.

"You can't win 'em all," O'Brien said.

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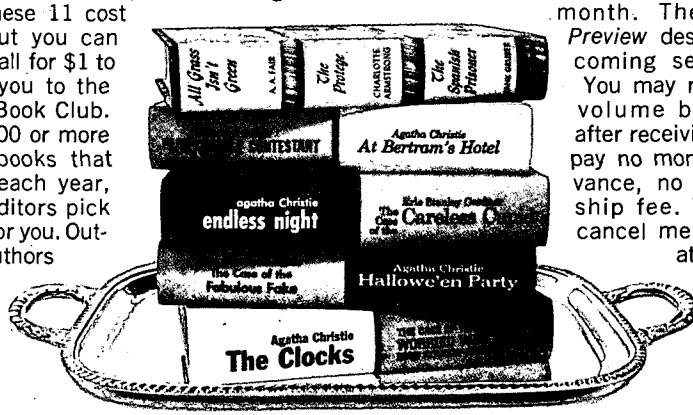

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